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A MAN OF TO-DAY.



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A MAN OF TO-DAY.

Gallant
A Novel.

BY

HELEN MATHERS,

AUTHOR OF

"COMIN' THRO' THE RYE," "SAM'S SWEETHEART,"

"MY LADY GREEN SLEEVES," "CHERRY RIPE!"

"STORY OF A SIN," ETC., ETC.

"What will you have?" quoth God.

"Pay for it and take it."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

F. V. WHITE & Co.,

14, BEDFORD STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1894.

PRINTED BY
KELLY AND CO. LIMITED, 182, 183 AND 184, HIGH HOLBORN, W.C.
AND MIDDLE MILL, KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY DEAR AND HONORED FRIEND
MORELL MACKENZIE.

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A MAN OF TO-DAY.

Book i.—The Apple.

[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER XIII.

“ And whaur gat ye that rose water
That does mak’ ye sae white ? ”

“ O, I did get the rose water,
Whaur ye will ne’er get nane,
For I did get that very rose water
Into my mother’s wambe.”

“ BASIL ! ”

The voice was the voice of Lala Hoyos, the high dogcart on which she was perched, the horse between the shafts, of that superlative smartness absolutely essential to all her surroundings, great or small, while the man

beside her was as well turned out as the rest of it—a mere accessory to herself, as indeed most things and people were.

“Mrs. Hoyos!” said Basil composedly, as he raised his straw hat, and nodded to Lord Hawkhurst.

“Bill told me you were here,” she said, “so we’ve come over to fetch you.”

“Thanks, awfully,” said Basil, in the most ungrateful of voices.

For a moment Mrs. Hoyos looked disconcerted, for if she knew one human book from cover to cover it was Basil, while Bill drew his mouth into whistling form, and wished himself further.

“I’ll get out,” said Mrs. Hoyos, and did so with great neatness and despatch, then looked up curiously at the ugly back of Penroses out of which Basil had just been turning when he heard his name called.

“Who lives there?” she said.

“That’s Denison’s house,” struck in Bill.

“You’re stopping at ‘The George,’ Strokoff, aren’t you? I’ll take the cart round, and perhaps you’ll give Lala some tea.”

“You are very untidy, Basil,” she said as they went side by side down the blazing street, “you would not dare to wear that tie in town, and your hair is cut shamefully.”

“And you are exactly right, as usual, Lala,” he said, glancing her keenly over from head to foot—and so she was, with that undefinable *cachet* not to be possessed by any woman who has not thoroughly disabused her mind of every prejudice in form of virtue.

“What is she like?” enquired Mrs. Hoyos languidly.

Basil laughed.

“Here is ‘The George,’” he said, and calling for tea, piloted her into a pleasant room upstairs, well littered with all the odds and ends of a young man whose mind was always in excess of his fashion.

When he had put her into a chintz-

covered easy chair, and kissed her in a quiet, methodical fashion, she produced a little silken bag with a mirror at the back of it, and powdered her nose carefully before she again spoke.

“Caught, *mon prince*,” she said, as she leaned her miraculously-dressed chestnut head indolently back among the cushions, “and you have been here over a fortnight!”

“Well?”

Lala’s shrug expressed volumes.

“Are you a man to stay in a hole like this for nothing?” she said.

“The Pleasures of Hope”—he murmured, and just then tea appeared, served on green and gold china at whose beauty Lala exclaimed enviously.

“Mr. Denison sent it round,” he said, “he was shocked at the delft he found me drinking out of the other day.”

Mrs. Hoyos looked down thoughtfully at a huge oval turquoise on her forefinger.

“Dumpy or tall?” she said.

“Five feet six.”

“Any style?”

“I say,” said Bill, blundering in, and looking uneasily from one to the other, “you’d better come back with us—you really had. We’ve got a man who does coster songs nearly as well as Chevalier, and some toppin’ girls who don’t mind anything. One of them is runnin’ me shockin’—and I want protection—’pon my soul I do.”

“I’ll come,” said Basil to his own intense astonishment, and Lala’s colourless face changed. In repose it was rather cruel, and as usual with a more or less burnt-out life, a life that has lived and enjoyed every moment of it, her mouth was perfectly straight, for the cold voluptuaries of the world are invariably thin-lipped, the thick-lipped people may be passionate, but they are faithful, and a good many other despised things also. Yet when Lala smiled, she was

irresistible, and there was triumph and real joy too, in the look she gave Basil, while Bill heaved a sigh of thanksgiving—his white elephant was safely housed, and his own path made easy for the present.

“Call your valet,” he said with wonderful animation; “have your things chucked into a portmanteau and you can drive Lala over, and I’ll borrow a ‘gee’ and follow.”

“Haven’t got my man here,” said Basil. “Suppose you take Lala round the garden while I collect my togs?”

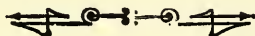
And so it happened that Easter, cavorting with her “boys” in the orchard, looked up to see two fashionable figures, singularly out of place among the stocks and cabbages of the kitchen garden, saw the Fitzwalters woman, and in a second of time—understood that Basil was—fetched.

“O my! What toffs!” ejaculated Reggy, audibly.

“What bloom—what sinful bloom!” mur-

mured Lala, as Easter, swallowed up in a cloud of adorers, vanished.

“I say, old man,” whispered Bill presently in Basil’s ear, “I admire your courage in running away—but when you’re quite out of it, you don’t mind my coming over, and taking up the running, do you?”



CHAPTER XIV.

“It is those who lead that are transgressors, rather than those who follow.”

—THUCYDIDES.

“It isn’t a house-party, it’s a menagerie,” said Lala Hoyos, glancing round the Fitzwalters dinner table with utter contempt. “Bill’s valet chooses his clothes for him, and his friends choose him. He has a heart, and to mix your guests properly, you must have the stomach of a camel, the hide of a rhinoceros, and the tact of the devil. Luckily the *chef* is all right, but he has a glass eye, and I’m always expecting to find it in the soup!”

Basil laughed. It was Lala’s charm that she never bored him. She had not committed the one unspeakable, unforgivable sin, the only one that a man recognises as a sin, of

wearying him, for to have really bored a man, covers so vast a tract of failure! You must have outraged his taste (his feelings don't matter) at all points, before he abandons his natural attitude towards you, and regards you as a dandelion instead of a clove-pink. You may commit a murder, basely deceive him, squander his money, even lose your beauty and spoil his, and he will love you still, but once bore him, and all is over.

Lala smiled too, with those grey eyes that we are told go to Paradise, having first sent a good many men to hell, for she knew it was quite impossible that a man in love should eat the dinner that Basil then was eating. She forgot that he and French cooking had been divorced these two weeks, and that good as had been the plain fare, and excellent cellar at Penroses, Basil had always been more *gourmet* than *gourmand*, and never ceased to thank the Providence that had endowed him with an absolutely perfect palate. It is one

of the greatest (in the long run) of earthly joys—pray observe that I don't say spiritual ones, for no day can dawn absolutely without hope to a man who can enjoy his breakfast, be solicitous about his lunch, and look forward with pious hope to his dinner. And no human being can work or play properly without good food, and he who neglects it is a fool.

“You're awfully out of place here, Lala,” he said, and indeed she looked like a star fallen among cabbages, in her airy gown of white chiffon with cunning gleams of green and gold about the breast, and put on with all the willowy grace of a woman who has lived every hour of her life, and has never found time to be anything but slender.

In vivid contrast to her small, narrow, high-bred face, crowned with exquisitely-dressed chestnut hair, rose up Easter's with its extraordinary colouring, and Lala read his thoughts as his appraising glance swept her.

“Is it real?” she said drily. “I’ve been trying to suit her skin with a word. Carmine? Too artificial. Rose-red? Too deep. Apple-blossom? Too pale. I never saw such colouring before in the whole course of my life.”

“I don’t think she can help it,” said Basil. “It’s indigenous—like your *vim*, for instance—and the way you put on your clothes.”

“Thank you. Your compliment is like the smart awning a cabman puts up to hide the craziness of his cab, and the broken-windedness of his horse. And man,” she added as if answering a thought, “is a contradictory animal, who won’t even be contradicted into doing things he doesn’t choose.”

“How did you know I was at Rokehorne?” he enquired.

“Is not my tailor thy tailor? And is not Bond Street common to all? I was trying on a new autumn coat as I passed through town, and Snips himself was superintending the

operation, when a letter was brought to him in your handwriting. I felt that it must be for me, and took it out of his hand without thinking, and the postmark happened to be that of the nearest post town to Bill."

She paused.

"So when my cousin Hawkhurst asked me down, I gave up Homburg," she concluded coolly, "and came the day before yesterday."

Basil nodded, knowing that Bill would as soon dream of asking the Queen to stop with him as that quintessence of fashion, his cousin Lala Hoyos, and he also knew very well why she was here, and had not yet reconciled himself to the manner of her appearance at Penroses. It was an extreme step for Lala to take, and one that entailed considerable risk, for if there is one thing that a true-born Briton hates more than another, it is being fetched home in a perambulator by his lawful or unlawful owner — whether he is enjoying himself flagitiously, or whether he isn't. And

Lala had gone perilously near to fetching Basil—and in the very nick of time too—and he keenly resented such interference. But Bill's *chef* was working with her, and for her, and glancing down the long wide table, her spirits rose.

Now there is much virtue in a table, or rather in the width of it, as all experts in entertaining know.

Sit down at a narrow board where you are over-looked, spied upon, by a row of close human eyes, and discomfort, misery even, will be the result. A desperate longing to escape from the good or ill-natured microscopes on the other side will assail you, but all the same, you sit tight, and add one more suffering to the expiation of your sins. But gaze at a landscape, men and women, what you will, at a distance, and you are insensibly soothed—though you don't in the least know why. You dream, and are happy, while into your expression will come that peaceful look

which the old masters so cunningly gave to their Madonnas by always making them look at things remote, and not immediately under their ken, and which Landseer gave to those lions in Trafalgar Square, whose noble and majestic gaze seems to scorn the near objects around them, as they gaze into far distant space.

“Did you ever behold such people?” she said, dropping her voice, “where the women are all right, the men are all wrong—and the other way round. Do you see that man over there? Well, he writes, and he is witty, but his finger-nails are always in deep mourning. He told me last night, that he always took a Turkish bath once a week. ‘Then I have always met you the day before,’ I said. He has paid me out, though, because he told me he always spelt erratic women with one ‘r’ and an ‘o,’ before he gave me my bedroom candlestick. Malet’s in a tight place,” she went on carelessly, “have you

heard? Dody's husband is dead. There are a lot of vacancies just now, and all the married women's best boys are having a shocking time. Just as if a lover wouldn't be just as unbearable as one's own husband at the end of the week! And Leila is divorcing her husband—at last—case number 191 on the list. She didn't mind the other woman turning her out of her house and living in it, with her name, but she never ceases to regret her best lace flounce!"

Basil looked enquiringly at Lala, who in town, among other things, was remarkable for her extremely quiet manners, because, as she was wont to say to her intimates, if you will only be moderate in your expressions and your appearance, you may be as immoderate in your acts as you please. The persons who talk about sins, never commit them—those who don't, do.

"O! you may scowl, Basil," she said.
"You are growing old and cold," she added,

in a swift underbreath, "and you do not trouble about anything nowadays much, except to be cross and dull. It is not that philosophy has taught you anything, or that you have taught yourself anything—your *froidueur* is due to dying fires within. And I always thought you would be alive—alive to your finger tips, even after you were dead. Now a man dined here last night, who manages to be good without being dull—a Mr. Burghersh. Bill says his place is a much better one than this, and we fished for an invitation, but Burghersh wouldn't give it. He only comes here because Miss Denison tells him to, or so he told Bill. Pretty good that, for a well bred man. They say he's only happy at Penroses."

"Very likely. Isn't that Carew over there?"

"Yes. And that's his new wife. The second from you on the right. Did you hear what happened at his wedding? He couldn't find the ring when it was wanted—fished for

it in vain with his gloved fingers—at last, in despair, bit furiously at his lavenders—when out came a complete set of false teeth! Does Burghersh *really* want to marry Apple-Cheeks?”

“It’s the other way round, I believe.”

“What luck for her! And of course she *must*. Marriage is her platform, and every woman wants a platform to herself. The person who gets up and squalls is safe—you can see her. Once give her a place above the ruck—room to move—a silence to speak in—and she has a chance. If she does not do badly, she does well. And Burghersh will be the showman in this instance. Wonderful going for her, of course, but it is the innocent, early bed-going, early-rising, syllabub-eating life that is responsible for more love-making, lawful and unlawful, than all the wicked delights of Town put together! You have more health, more energy, and, most strenuous ally of the devil, more *time* than

you have in Town for getting into mischief! The cream, the roses, the fresh air are all delicious—but there must be love, or the pretence of it, to give them flavour. It isn't opportunity or importunity, or both combined, that makes people do such idiotic things in the country—it's simply that there is nothing else to be done. In Town, of course, one doesn't want—one doesn't even remember a man—he assumes his true proportions—but in the country," and she shrugged her shoulders, and finally expressed her opinion that rural joys were the most immoral in the world; "and the costliest too," she added significantly, "because, for a man to throw down his future, his life, and his fortune in payment for a fancy that *may* last half-an-hour or half a lifetime, is about the biggest gamble he can do. And that price Burghersh is prepared to pay—poor fool!"

Basil was silent for awhile, then he enquired for her husband.

“He is in Scotland. You are eating a bit of his grouse now,” said Lala, whose way of mentioning her lord suggested that a husband did not come under the heading of a male at all. And, indeed, the husbands of Society women occupy a place in the world’s economy extremely hard to define, having been altogether overlooked in its original scheme.

“Who is that fresh-cheeked girl at the end of the table?” enquired Basil. “The ‘toppin’ ones dazzle me so, I can’t get past them all at once.”

“Lady Biddy—the girl who Bill says ought to be Burghersh’s choice. The old woman next to Bill is her mother. She represents the type of blameless aristocrat whom you never hear of—except in the obituary. Isn’t the place hideous?” she went on, dropping her voice, “and don’t these priceless pictures, those heavy pieces of gold plate shriek out, ‘Life tenant!’ ‘Life tenant!’ at the top of

their voices, every time you look at them? It makes one feel inclined to build one's funeral pyre of one's own unentailed and most precious goods!"

She leaned back in her chair, and looked at Basil. He was good to look at, and into her eyes came the look that no man on earth but he had ever brought there . . . and Basil knew that look. It had always appealed to him—and it appealed to him now, the little colourless, high-bred face still held its own.

For a man's habits remain, when all his passions, and fancies, and longings, are dead.

CHAPTER XV.

“The old Chaldean oracles, fragments of angelic wisdom, speak of two Suns, and of one as ‘more true’ than the other. That ‘more true’ Sun shines throughout the entire spiritual universe, and its heat and light are the Love and Wisdom of the Divine Man, who is the Centre and life of all things.”

EASTER was standing outside the schoolroom door — not listening, for the doors always being open, and everybody talking at the top of his voice, to listen was a work of super-erogation, but because her name—with all the deadly fascination of one’s own name—had caught her ear.

“Easter don’t like it, my child,” said Dinkie; “even if you don’t want a thing, you like to know it’s there—and Easter ain’t perfect by any means—why, didn’t Momus accuse Venus of being a heavy-footed beauty,

and deny her right to absolute perfection because he heard her approach ? ”

“ Where did you get that from ? ” enquired Melons with interest.

“ And pray, miss,” said Dinkie, with great acerbity, “ do you suppose I study at the pure fount of Greek literature for *nothing* ? Don’t attempt to talk to classical scholars, if *you* please ! ”

“ H’m,” said Melons, “ you go on the plan of little and often, I suppose, in amassing your knowledge ? ”

“ Certainly, my love. Never litter up your mind with superfluous knowledge or trash, or you’ll always be bringing up some other fellow’s ideas, and be called a plagiarist, or something insulting. Reading is a disease born of idleness, and only seriously contracted by the sit-me-downs of life, and I highly approve of that Ptolemy who refused to the inhabitants of Pergamus a supply of papyrus, on the plea that a second library

was not required in the world. Penroses is the other library that is not required. Let us then be up and *doing*," he spouted grandiloquently. "Ain't it a fact that nearly all the great workers in the world have been men who never found time to rake up, and read about, other men's great ideas and works, because they were always too busy conceiving and carrying out their own? So with a man who lives his life—how is he to be writing down his emotions when he is enjoying 'em? That's why most books are such tommy-rot, because you don't get the man's impressions hot and hot, but a lot of ghosts that have faded into the pale wall of memory. O! you may snigger, miss, but that's clean out of my own head—which aches terrible bad this morning," he added in impotent conclusion.

"So it ought. You look regularly deboshed, and your nose is like old Shrubsole's——"

"It was that sherry wine last night," said

Dinkie, holding his head in both hands, as he lay at ease on the schoolroom floor. "It lights up the fires of Shadrach and Abednego in one's inside—catch me accepting a drink again when I go out ratting, without knowing where the man gets his tippie. It's almost as great a risk as when you are staying at a strange house, and a plateful of eggs is held you to choose from—I always say a prayer when I choose mine. Dear me," he continued in a philosophising way, "if only we could look inside *before* we choose, instead of after!"

"If only we could be born old, and end up young," said Nan dreamily.

"Everything comes too late," said Dinkie, pulling the cushion under his head into more comfortable position; "even a bishop never gets his promotion till he hasn't got any calves to show!"

Melons jumped as Dinkie's lolling arm felled a small table to the floor, and she exclaimed irritably, "How you made me jump!"

“Like the frog, my dear, only what *he* said was ‘O! Lord, how you did make me hop!’ And as to your nerves, have you observed that one is never upset by one’s *own* noises? O dear no! When we are crashing and banging away in a fine frenzy, and smashing the crockery, we don’t put our hands to our ears and cry out about our poor nerves—not much! No! we go on grandly, enjoyingly, devastatingly, and have a high old time; it is only when *other* people drop the fireirons or play Aunt Sally with the household gods that our heads ache. O yes!”

“It’s high time,” said Melons, who seemed to owe Dinkie a grudge this morning, “that the Chief took you away from that rubbishing grammar school, and made you work, you’ll be always getting into mischief till you do.”

“I thank you, dear love, but I don’t mean to be one of the moilers of the earth. Did you ever see a harder worker than Nan?—and

so terribly willing, too—it's a great mistake to be willing—you only get laughed at, and nobody respects you. I can't abide an officious person myself. *I* mean to be a shirker. Shirkers and workers rhyme, and are born in pairs. It's a law of Providence—or Political Economy, or something of that sort — and it works splendidly. Every shirker has only to find his other half, who is a worker, and all goes well. 'The working wife makes the holiday husband,' and *vice versâ*. And there's a fine, self-sacrificing spirit in the workers that makes it a positive pleasure to immolate themselves for the shirkers—to say nothing of the glow of satisfaction they feel at knowing themselves so much nobler and better than the person they are helping—and the shirker grins, and puts up with the contempt—it's so much pleasanter than having to work! Lie down and let the clouds roll by, someone or other is sure to trundle you out of danger,

and take care that you are not exposed to it again. And in conclusion, my children, there are natures (like Nan's) that give all their lives long, and natures that grab. *I'd be born a grabber.*"

Nan shook her head in violent dissent—to get a word in edge-ways she knew was impossible, but she hated to hear Dinkie thus belittle himself.

"In addition," continued Dinkie, "I'd be born a fool. The helpless fools—as *you* call 'em—are the cleverest people out. Why was the fool of the court formerly the most powerful person in it? Because under his caps and bells he hid the wisest head there. They can *afford* to be fools—and they've mastered the true secret of success in life—to make other people do everything for them, while the clever person who begins by exulting in dependence on no man, finds out that *he* is the fool who has to work to his dying day."

“Nan!” cried Easter’s voice from the threshold, and Nan came rushing out, and together by devious ways they wended their way to the hothouse tank, sacred to all conversations of a private character, and in the near neighbourhood of which had been celebrated those snail-feasts of Bunkulorum, now almost forgotten. One can’t go on for ever remembering other folks’ sins, one finds it hard, sometimes, to remember one’s own.

It was very still here, with the warm, moist, indescribable smell of young green things growing, and when Easter had barred the door, she looked round at the young, unconscious face that was so eagerly watching hers. That’s was Nan’s charm—that she was perfectly unconscious of self—that she thought of you—dived into *your* heart—and would change places with you any day, to bear your sorrow.

It is called variously, this gift—it goes by the name of genius, sympathy, comprehension,

but it is something more—it is a drawing away by the Divine hand of the film that hangs between ordinary folk and their fellow humans, and is granted to none but the noble-minded and the pure in heart.

“Nan,” cried Easter abruptly, “how I *hate* a man who has power to make one *feel*! and then, as hard as ever he can—runs away!”

Nan coloured, hugging her bosom with her thin arms. Already perhaps she understood better what love—if by love you mean the universal love, is—than did her sister.

“You know,” went on Easter, “it’s such a lovely feeling that you are the right side of the hedge, and don’t care a bit: but it’s another pair of shoes to feel yourself at the mercy of a wretch who is probably laughing at you all the while, and who finds it as easy as pie to forget *you*, knowing that he has made it impossible for you to forget *him*!”

Easter was pacing restlessly up and down

the tiled path between the geranium wall and the great tubs of glossy-leaved orange and lemon plants beneath the vines, all throbbing, palpitating, with an emotion which was much more nearly akin to curiosity than to slighted love, if she had only known it. Nan, sitting on the edge of the tank, held a grain of comfort in her hand for Easter, and could no more withhold it, than she could keep back any other thing to make a human soul happier.

“Dinkie says that Basil went away because he was falling in love with you,” she said, “and Dinkie’s nearly always right,” added Nan proudly.

“He went away with that woman to please himself. She came here to look for him—and he *let* himself be taken—O! he has had such practice in making fools of us all! It’s as easy as pie to understand Jem, but Basil understands women—there is just the difference. And as to that ridiculous idea of Dinkie’s—

O! you can cheek a man into anything for the time being," said Easter gloomily, "but it isn't a matter to look back upon with pride. An aggressive woman . . . What could be more degrading? And I've always cared so little about men—perhaps because they cared about me so much."

Nan looked at her sister in all the young splendour of her vivid beauty, instinct too, with the mingled fire and softness of a passion that she struggled with, yet could not wholly repel, and wondered for the thousandth time how Basil had been able to resist her.

"You are both so wilful," she said, shaking her head sadly. "You want to be different to everybody else, though I expect you've got hearts much like other folks—poor Basil and poor Easter!"

"Why do you pity him?" flashed out Easter. "There is only one person in the world he ever truly and faithfully loved, or will love—and that is Basil Strokoff."

Nan thought of Basil as he had talked to her in the cellar. She always remembered people at their best, and forgot the rest.

“I’m sure he tries to be good,” she said simply, “and of course he isn’t always. You ain’t yourself,” she added timidly, “and you lead poor Jem a terrible life; but you’re *much* fonder of him than you suppose.”

“*What?*” cried Easter.

“Yes—you are. You turn to him to do little things for you—and you admire him. I’ve often seen you considering him with your head on one side, and you know you’ve always got him to stand by you—like the little ones who make faces at us from behind mother’s petticoat, and I shouldn’t wonder if you don’t end up by being dreadfully in love with him—and quite happy.”

“But I don’t want to be happy. I want to know as much as that woman who looked at us across the ditch. She knows—*everything* worth knowing——”

“She doesn’t look a bit good,” said Nan reluctantly. “I was coming out of a cottage when she drove Basil past, and they both looked—wicked. He wasn’t *my* Basil at all ; and I’d just left poor Mary Martin,” went on the child wistfully, in her strange, old-world manner, “*she* had been wicked, too, they said, but she looked quite happy lying so still with the flowers in her hands I’d put there. God draws them all into his bosom—the poor, the broken, the sad, and makes them whole—and I *know* Mary’s happy now.”

“Nan,” said Easter, with some moisture in her eyes, “you are getting prosy. I should hate to die myself—especially if I were having a good time. The only people one ought to weep for, are those who have never had one. And you haven’t helped me a bit. You are only another animated sign-post to point out the charms of—Jem. I know he is a handsome front door—and you’ve only got to walk in, and everything will be well

furnished and garnished inside — and no secrets anywhere, and Basil is a trap-door, down which you'd come fearful back-falls and probably break your neck—still, it would be exciting, and as long as one was alive, one would *live* in his company.”

She started, for at that moment there smote warningly on their ears the notes of that bell irreverently nick - named “Great Tom,” and set up by Mr. Denison for the calling together of his sons and his daughters, his men - servants and his maid - servants, and more especially for the early awakening of the latter, though having got used to it, they were later than ever, so that “Great Tom ” only woke up the whole town, instead, and was loathed accordingly.

“And if ever I do marry Jem,” said Easter, as she set off nimbly towards the house, “it will be to get away from that bell !”

CHAPTER XVI.

“Every hour is wasted that is not spent on love.”

—VANINI.

BASIL had been gone a week, and Easter was sitting in the Green-room window making frills, with Jem to hinder her. She really loved her needle, and was therefore more than half-armed against the arch enemy, man, for the woman who is able to make her own frocks cannot possibly devote the same time and attention to a man as if he holds her undivided consideration; the width of her skirts, not the width of his nose, the quality of the stuff, not that of his morals, claiming her superior attention.

She had allowed herself to be stalked into this cool retreat because she had a devouring curiosity to know what was going on at Fitz-

walters, to which place Jem had gone more than once lately, and now, as she pinned her work to her knee, she demanded what *those people* were doing over there?

“Ask me another,” said Jem. “It would be hard to say what they *don’t* do. On Sunday Mrs. Hoyos got out the team, put the servants inside the coach, and drove everybody who would go, to church! About midnight they dressed up the nicest-looking boy there in the Marchioness’s best night bib-and-tucker, and—and——”

Jem paused and roared.

“I’m told the old lady’s face was a sight when she found him there, and heard his reasons! She cleared out this morning with Biddy, and Hawkhurst is going about looking squashed. He says he was quite respectable till Lala Hoyos came! On Saturday night we all sat round a sheet held tight and level with our chins, and blew a feather on it, and Strokoff, who was trying to grab it, you

know, overbalanced himself, and came down plump into the middle of the sheet and patent leathers—and—and legs—and if the servants' hall made the row, and behaved as *we* did, why, it would get sacked, that's all," concluded Jem, with strong disgust.

"I don't blame them," said Easter, "I should *love* to be in the midst of it all, and I'd frivel as wildly as the best of them."

"Hawkhurst wants you all to come over to dinner," said Jem reluctantly, "he wrote an invitation, but I wouldn't bring it. I know what the Chief is, and he ain't far wrong to keep you out of that set."

"Then why don't you keep away yourself?"

"I can't; Hawkhurst's my nearest neighbour, and we're related; besides, didn't you make me go?"

"All blue-blooded people are cousins," said Easter, loftily. "*We* have no relations. I suppose *she* is your cousin, too?"

“In a way. I can’t say I’m proud of the Hoyos as a connection ; still, she’s a thoroughbred, and she dresses in a way to give all the other women fits. Odd that the most dissolute women in all ages have always been the best dressers,” he added, meditatively.

“Turn it the other way round,” said Easter, “and say that their clothes made them so attractive they couldn’t help being snares to your sex, and therefore wicked. I should say that she and Basil Strokoff made a pair.”

“They are no end of pals,” said Jem. “Doesn’t Sallust say that to have the same desires and the same aversions is assuredly a firm bond of friendship? And their tastes seem identical. They talk a shibboleth of their own that nobody else seems to understand, and judging by their allusions, I should say they had spent half their lives together.”

“And constancy is the last vice of which I should have accused him,” said Easter.

“There isn’t much constancy in that

quarter," said Jem. "She amuses him—that's all."

"It's everything. O! Jem, how I wish I were going to eat my dessert off the Fitzwalters gold plate to-night! To make other people happy, you must first enjoy yourself."

"So you shall when you've mar——"

"Jem!" cried Easter precipitately, seeing that dreadful something in his eye which she had successfully dodged so long, "I want you to do something for me—it's very simple."

But she looked so sweet that Jem mis] trusted her.

"What is it?"

"You see these frills—they've all got to be pinned on this piece of muslin——"

Jem beamed—yards and yards of frills, and he to sit beside her while she sewed them!

"And I want you just to hold these pins for me!"

Jem, with careful laboriousness, took the pins, and laid them out on the palm of his

broad, willing hand. It was a pity that a little jerk of Easter's elbow spilt them on the floor just as he was opening his lips to speak, but when he had gone down on his hands and knees, and picked them all up, Easter said :

“*That's* not the way to hold pins, stupid ; you must put them between your teeth, like dressmakers do, you know, and tailors—O ! I forgot, tailors don't use them.”

But Jem continued to hold out the pins, and made no effort whatever to commit suicide by swallowing them. On the contrary, he nodded and smiled with a great deal of meaning.

“O ! very well,” said Easter, turning scarlet, and furious at being bowled out, “I'll go up to mother—she'll help me.”

“No,” said Jem, trembling for his opportunity, and not desiring Wrath as the hand-maiden of Love, “don't go away——”

“Then put those pins in your mouth.”

She smiled as she said it, one of those brief, bewitching, tantalising smiles that made her altogether adorable, and dazzled Jem so that he took a mouthful of pins, and blamed himself for a fool.

“Good boy,” she said approvingly. “Now you mustn’t talk, or you’ll swallow them, and be choked, and then what would become of dear Lady Biddy?”

He longed to say that Easter wouldn’t care if he did, but prudence restrained him, and suppressed irritation made his face red. Many a man might have wished nothing better than to sit watching this girl at her needlework, always a fascinating occupation to the male eye, but Jem waxed restive as she drew the welting cord through the muslin to get the desired fulness, and he began to pour in the pins with a callous indifference as to whether she were ready or not, that soon aroused her indignation.

“Jem,” she said, “I’m afraid you have

a shocking bad temper!" Whereupon he champed the pins about furiously, and shewed imminent signs of bolting the lot.

"Sort them out like a good boy," she said, "and give me one at a time," and so potent was her influence over him that he obeyed, knowing that she was fooling him all the while, yet one may be fooled without looking a fool, and Jem champing those pins, and carefully wiping them on his handkerchief before he handed them to her, aroused in Easter something very like admiration, so that once or twice when he was not looking at her, she stole a look at him, kindly. The folded-back windows made mirrors that reflected her own and Jem's figures, also the fresh coolness of that corner of the garden on which the Green-room looked, and Jem's morning dress, his coat, waistcoat, leggings, and the rest all in different tints, and in those subdued colours that he affected, became him extremely well, as Easter was not slow to observe. On the

whole, a man is quite as dependent on the fashion of his clothes as a woman is; he is but a poor creature without them, and mostly cuts a sorry figure as a statue, but dress him up this way, that way, and you make him interesting or the reverse—just like a woman.

Jem felt quite sure he would not be allowed to hand over those last pins till some interruption came from without, and presently he got reckless, relieved himself of his remaining small cargo, and, stooping down, kissed the little hand that was now moving so languidly at its task.

“Easter,” he said, “when are you going to marry me?”

“Never.”

“In three months or so?”

“In three centuries.”

“That’s a promise, mind. I’ll wait.”

“But I don’t want to be married. It would be so—so dull.”

“How do you know? You haven’t tried it.”

“Jem, your fate is Lady Biddy. It’s so suitable, and respectable, and all that.”

“I don’t want to be respectable, I want to be happy.”

“So do I. That’s why I’m not going to marry you.”

“That’s the cruellest thing you’ve said or done to me yet.”

“You should never marry a girl out of a big family if you want a curtain drawn over your little failings, Jem.”

“And I mean to marry a girl out of a big family!”

“Marry! marry!” cried Easter impatiently, “and not a word of love—not one little, little word.”

“But you know all about that. My love for you is not a thing to talk about—it’s myself. And you know it, Easter.”

Easter leaned her head back against the

tall, upright back of the chair, covered with worsted work of her own manufacture.

“But I should like to hear all about it, Jem,” she said. “You see, you are the very first — the very first man (Daddy and the boys don’t count), who ever made love to me!”

“I can’t talk love to you,” he said simply, “I can only love you. Where you are is my heaven, and where you are not is hell—that’s all. Ever since I came back, I’ve felt you belonged to me, even Strokoff did not make me jealous, and some day you’ll come to me, Easter, if only because you want somebody to be kind to you.”

“But I want to be burnt, Jem,” she cried, “to feel the fire, to suffer, one can’t be just ‘Yea, yea,’ and ‘Nay, nay,’ and you can’t make me feel it, dear old Jem, and I won’t be like Hugon, who, having but one life, has never lived it!”

“Better half a life than one burnt to

ashes," said Jem ; " give me the chance, dear, and I'll win you yet."

He took the little hand with the gold thimble on it, and kissed it warmly, gently, as one not unaccustomed to the art, resolutely turning his eyes away from her lips, for it is only the fool or the libertine who snatches greedily at unripe fruit, and Jem had immense self-control, and knew how to wait, even if he desired to establish a first claim upon her ; and above all, he thought he thoroughly understood Easter.

" O, Jem," she said piteously, " I'm so young ! I'm only a schoolgirl just come home for good, and I don't want to be married "—she lifted an imploring little face to his—" and being a man, how you can *want* to get married passes my comprehension ! "

Jem pushed his chair back for safety, then laughed, and coming close up behind, kissed the top of her head, then walked

off looking pleased, as if he had done nothing at all uncommon.

“Jem,” said Easter, “I’ll tell you a secret. If you did carry me with you on your travels round the world, you very often forgot me !”

“I didn’t,” said Jem, as with hands plunged in his pockets, an image of able-bodied ease, he regarded her. “I mean—I didn’t take you as you are. I left you a dear little girl in short frocks—how was I to know you’d be dearer yet in long ones ?”

“That’s what mother says, they take so much more stuff! Jem! it isn’t *me*, it’s this wretched complexion of mine you are in love with. It will be gone before I am twenty——”

“When we shall have been married somewhere about two years. And you bet, you’ll have that complexion still. Rummy thing,” he added, meditating, “how Mrs. Hoyos’ colourlessness is one of the most fetching

things about her, and your strong point is just the reverse——”

“If there is anything I loathe,” flashed out Easter, “it is being discussed to my face.”

“And you’d get vain if you heard all the things said about you behind your back,” remarked Jem.

“Who says them?” enquired Easter in tones of assuagement.

“Everybody.”

“Prince Strokoff?”

“Not quite such a fool with the Hoyos around,” said Jem tersely. “It’s mostly Bill Hawkhurst—and me.”

“Jem,” said Easter, “you’re a dear. You leave all these lively people, to come and sit with dull me, and if it were not for you, I should *hang* myself for a failure. And now shut your eyes tight.”

He shut them.

“Put your arms flat down to your sides like

a raw 'recruity,' and don't move till I give you leave, *whatever* happens."

Jem obeyed all his commanding officer's orders with precision, and awaited results. He was aware of a chair being dragged up close to him, of a spicy smell in his near neighbourhood, of a butterfly touch on his brow, a scrambling down of a lightweight in petticoats, then a sound of retreating steps, mistrustful as those of mice.

"Jem," said a voice a long way off, "don't open your eyes. I want to tell you I've just kissed you (it didn't count when we were little, you know), which I never could have done, if I'd been the very least bit in love with you. If I had been, you should have kissed *me*. But I'm very — very fond of you."

The door closed. Jem opened his eyes.

"*Bless her!*" he said.

CHAPTER XVII.

“ All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
 Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but as ministers of love,
 And feed his sacred flame.”

It was the night before the First of September, and Basil Strokoff had not yet returned, nor let Mr. Denison know if he meant to keep a promise made some time ago that he would shoot with him on the First, and now in the midst of a delightful interior of colour, warmth, and sober richness of tone, Tom sat alone—thinking.

All the light seemed concentrated on the polished walnut table that reflected every dish of fruit, and every glass and flower, rivalling in its beauty those tablecloths of a brilliant modern painter that make us long to know the name of the washerwoman who produces

such satin smoothness as he has taken brush in hand to copy!

The girls' dinner-napkins are thrown heedlessly down on the walnut-wood into which they have dipped their faces as in a looking-glass. From the panelled walls looked down those pictures that are the rich man's chief furnishing, and the crucial flowers of his taste, Clytie showed her white, low-browed beauty on a pedestal against dark folds of velvet curtains, and a huge Crown Derby china punch-bowl caught the light with its *voyant* colours in a remote corner.

The dark Turkey carpet, the sober green leather and walnut-wood chairs made the candle-lit table a very oasis of brightness that consorted ill enough with Mr. Denison's mood, for he was enduring that *mauvais quart d'heure* that few men miss in one way or another in the course of a lifetime, even if it has been a phenomenally successful one.

And all things had prospered with Mr.

Denison up to the present time, and now the luck had turned. Have the stars no power at all over our destinies? And does not one of the oldest books in the world declare how the stars in their courses fought against Sisera, and prevailed?

How comes it that sometimes we are absolutely hag-ridden by an ill-luck that pursues us in everything that we touch? Unimaginable calamities overtake us, and the more promptly we rise after every blow of fate—the heavier is the cudgel with which she again strikes us to earth, till at last we sink to rise no more.

Thus Mr. Denison who had flirted lately with Jute and lost forty thousand pounds in a single day, had also failed to win an action he had brought against a neighbour whose chimney-smuts defiled his rose-blooms, and in which the costs had amounted to a very large sum, and the first of these things would not have happened if he had been brought up to

trade, for learning a business is quite a different matter to learning a profession, and no man of birth and taste ever masters his trade-lesson quite satisfactorily. Tom had been extremely lucky, and made money very early in life, which was a pity, as it is easier to climb up than down—and more graceful, and his tastes were expensive, if not extravagant, while in the numerals of his family he was a spendthrift.

He did not realise all this as he sat thinking, and looking at the ruby wine in his glass. There was a good deal of money left still, but he must retrench, he must put down some of his hunters, give up part of those well-stocked coverts that ran into five figures a year, and Maria—must learn to study economy.

He thought of his children, these young people who held on the calm, ruthless tenour of their way, always believing that their parents must be wrong, because they were

their parents, and they themselves right, because they were young, and so cocksure of everything. Among them all there was only one who would understand in the least—and that was Nan, his plainest, once uncared-for child.

Why do most children's voices grow hushed, and their faces grave and formal at the father's approach? Is it only the inherent cruelty of youth to age, that will not suffer its participation or fellowship in their pleasures, and that thrusts those who would love to play with them, and be understood of them, back into the cold shadows of loneliness and neglect?

Alas! we are brutal, we are selfish when we are young, but if we could see, if we knew ourselves as such, there would be no spring-time to our lives at all. And at the cost of all else, give us a few years of youth, since disillusionment begins so early, and lasts, alas! for ever!

The thought came to the poor man then, as it has done to so many others before him, that we want our failures early in life, and our successes late. For youth suffices so amply to itself with its bounding hope, its powers of enjoyment, and all the glorious potentialities of its young blood, as to make actual surroundings almost immaterial, such zest does it bring to every common thing or act. Surely therefore, to intoxicate youth with success, is to paint the lily, and even partly negative that happiness which is so especially the heritage of youth, and occasionally of honourable old age.

Tom sat so still that presently the door opened softly, and some little thieves' heads, intent on dessert, were popped in. This gave him his opportunity, and for a time sultry weather reigned in the nurseries, the school-room, and even the kitchen, till the news that Tom's head gamekeeper was waiting for him in the gun-room, removed an explosive from

the bosom of the family, while delectable thoughts of the morrow soothed to calmness each ravaged breast.

And out of doors the saintly moon was pouring her white flood of false sentiment out upon the world, and the old rascal to whom she gave house-room, and who probably taught her most of her wicked ways, was grinning at the amount of folly upon which he and she looked down, making more colourless yet Lala Hoyos' small face as she walked alone on the terrace at Fitzwalters, drawing through her fingers the myrtle leaves that covered the wall, and with a strange qualm at her heart, asking if she had been wise—to let him go back to the girl whom he had tried, but not been able, to forget?

And in the Penroses garden, Easter was stepping in and out of the long black shadows made by the poplars across the moon-washed lawn. She knew that her father expected

Basil to turn up on the morrow, knew also that his bag and baggage were still at "The George," but in her own mind felt quite sure that he would not come—now or ever.

And there is only one situation that a woman of spirit cannot fill with credit to herself, and that is—of waiting—and for a man. It's humiliating—it's hateful—and it's the unbearable reason, why half the women jump up after they have waited what seems to them ages, take the arm of the nearest admirer, and disappear round the corner just as the right man tardily appears upon the scene.

And feeling that she loathed him, Easter's feet naturally took her to where she had seen Basil last, and so came to the gate by the meadow where she found Hugon leaning her arms on the top bars, and herself lost in thought.

"A penny!" said Easter, stealing softly up behind, her lustreless black silk gown

trailing behind her, and bare white arms showing like lilies against it, a thousand beauties not to be coldly chronicled (and indeed not tangible, or even to be painted, else why do the pictures of the world's most renowned charmers disappoint us so cruelly?), all touched with the witchery of a light that turned her to a dazzling transparency of white and rose.

"I was thinking about Fairmile," said Hugon.

"Poor soul," said Easter gently, the fret in her own heart teaching her sympathy. "I wish you had not to go back there — but you must come to us again."

Hugon looked at the girl with eyes that seemed to say : "I have *done*—I *know*," while those of Easter said : "I want to know—I will try," and looking earnestly at her, and for the first time, save in response, kissed her. It was not a Judas kiss . . . it is in the things that we could say, and do not, that we

prove our mastery over ourselves and our surroundings, the unspoken word is like the piece of gold changed by a spendthrift; possessing it, he rules the world, in parting with it, he places himself at the world's mercy and is its slave. "I left my book under the tree where we were sitting this afternoon," she said, "I sleep so badly—and like to have something to fall back on—and I'm tired—will you fetch it for me?"

Easter to whom had always come until quite lately that sleep "which makes the darkness short," glanced uneasily at the distant belt of trees, then back at the orchard where she had played her game at Touch-last, than tossed her head, and snatching up her long train, and showing a mass of snowy drapery below, set off with the swift ease of a yacht slipping before the wind, for—O, rarest accomplishment in woman! — Easter could run, and now went in her finest form, a form that enabled her to top a five-

barred gate easily, as Dinkie who had recently bet against her, knew to his cost. And I don't think that even the onward sweep and swell of the ocean breakers, or the giant race of the wind shadows chased by the sun across a limitless plain, equals the rhythm, the flow, and the beauty of movement displayed by a perfectly symmetrical human animal going at full speed.

So she sped on, and the rascally old man in the moon winked as she was swallowed up in the dark belt of trees that after the glister of light without, show to her of Cimmerian hue, though she really stepped on to a heavenly carpet cunningly traced in green and silver, and mysterious too as Nature's harmonies in green and silver ever are, and so groped her way with outstretched arms that seemed to have caught some of the white light without, and to shine out of the black folds of her gown with the purity of crystal.

Something timid, appealing, lovable was in her attitude—and also in her voice, as she said in a whisper : “Where is it ?” her head a little lifted, all her loveliness gathered up as it were in one full cup of sweetness, and clear as day to the eyes that watched her coming, and that changed, and changed again at her approach.

Basil had dined, he had also, being in a reckless mood absorbed quite as much rack-punch as was good for him, and was now on his way to tell Mr. Denison he had, according to promise, returned for to-morrow’s shoot, and he had not been able to forget her . . . he had never tried harder at anything in his life, and he had not been able . . . and she knew of his arrival and had come to meet him . . .

Many a man loves a woman outside himself, raves about her, dreams of her, works himself into a frenzy about her, but it is all outside, or on the surface, she has not got to the core

of his heart, cut into the very quick of him, and left him bleeding, and at her mercy. And with some men the knowledge, the suspicion even of being loved is the actual conception of love in themselves, and Basil remembered those letters he had never got, and a man cannot be eight-and-twenty, in a hay-scented meadow, and under the influence of rack-punch, and that rascally old moon (who is responsible for three parts of the folly in the world), without having his blood kindled when that which he covets, and into which all the glamour of the night has stolen, steals suddenly upon him—a gift sent straight from the gods.

Perhaps some such exaltation came over Basil then as Endymion knew when after long search he came

“O! joy, upon a naked waist . . .”

“We were sitting here,” she said aloud, and went down on one knee to sweep the

ground with her arm, "Nan must have taken it in."

Still kneeling there, palm downwards to the grass, she looked up to the interlaced boughs overhead—looked up steadily as one to whom had come the word of command, "Halt!" and he who commanded must have his bidding done, and she would not, could not, gainsay him.

A shaft of light darting suddenly through the leaves like a magic sword, made divine the pallor of a face from which the mere rose and white fairness had fled, and a long sobbing, tremulous sigh escaped her, like a low moan that trembles between joy and pain and fear.

Perchance that white flame pierced the clouds that had hung about her soul, and showed her what was there—and frightened her. She had been acting a part lately, but now she was alone, and face to face with her heart, and unconsciously her lips half syllabled a name—did they really utter it?

Vividly, intensely, as she had never felt it before, Basil's image projected itself on her mind, and she trembled, but had not power to thrust it away, he was with her—yes—and she loved him—*loved* him . . . and in that moment the heat, and strength and magic, that passion lends to life, touched her, if but passingly, and on the instant, Basil in the flesh stood before her.

She sprang up like a startled forest thing, and shied away from him, but he caught that look in her eyes, and the heave of her white breast, and he cried aloud :

“ Good God, I *love* her ! Easter—Easter ! ”

She half turned in her flight to find him beside her, pale as she, but how manly, how strong, how adorable he appeared ! Eagerly, yearningly, with the eternal question and answer of life in their eyes, they looked in each other's beautiful young faces, finding but love's mirror there, and with all the wild glamour and intoxication of the night surging

up in their blood, and drawing them irresistibly into each other's arms, their two souls might in another moment have trembled together, and their lips have met, when a staccato voice close at hand exclaimed :

“Good *evening*, Miss Easter ! Lovely evening for a walk, ain't it ? ”

He got no reply, for Easter was gone, and Basil, livid with fury, was confronting the long-nosed intruder.

“Curse you, Gardner,” he said, “I've a mind to break every bone in your skin. How dare you come spying over here after Miss Denison and me ! ”

“*Well !*” said Daddy, who had rapidly retreated to a respectful distance, “I like that ! Can't I come out for a smoke and a stroll without having my bones disintegrated for wishing you ‘Good evening ?’ I heard voices, and came over to see who it was — naturally ! ”

Meanwhile Basil in a whirl of conflicting passions had fled after Easter, whom he saw half a field ahead of him escaping as for dear life, but what could he say to her under present circumstances that would not have all the absurdity of an anti-climax? So he made no effort to pass the shadow of the trees, but his heart was full of bitterness and wrath at the meddling fool who had snatched from him a joy out of which no after repentance could have stolen the sweetness, while Easter sped on and on, wild tumult within her, dreading nothing so much as pursuit, and growing quieter when she found that none was attempted, so that presently she walked more and more slowly, and had almost mastered herself by the time she reached the gate.

“I can’t find your book, Hugon,” she said with only a slight tremor in her voice, “I fancy someone must have come over from ‘The George,’ and attached it!”

“You have not had time to look,” said Hugon reproachfully, “you have scarcely been gone two minutes.”

“Two minutes !”

Easter repeated the words unconsciously and blankly. Oh ! it must have taken years at least in which she had learned—aye, and resolved to unlearn—a woman’s divinest lesson !

“Why don’t you go and look for it yourself ?” she said as she pushed open the gate, while all the time in hurrying iteration, some innermost soul of her soul was exultantly crying : “It was a narrow escape, but you are safe—safe ! You still belong to yourself—you are your own, it was only the witchery of the night, and the opportunity, that were merging you into the identity of a man who does not even pretend to care for you—it is Lala Hoyos whom he loves !”

Yet there rang in her ears that startled *awakened* cry—a cry wrung as it were from

Basil against his will : “ My God—I *love* her ! ” as if he too had fought against self-surrender, and rebelled against it even while he yielded.

Lala would have smiled—knowing a man’s little ways—especially his after-dinner ways, and never made the mistake of confounding a man in a passionate mood, with a man whose mood she had made passionate, but Easter had no such Catholic experiences of the sex to guide her—there had been love, or something very like it, in Basil’s face just now, surely.

Yet what had he seen in hers to startle him into such unexpected folly ? Her cheek burned as she thought of how possessed with the idea of him, body and soul, she had been when he appeared before her ; nay, had not her very lips echoed the cry of her heart, and so she had given the sign, and herself altogether away ?

She flew forward, pierced with the in-

tolerable thought, and loathing herself as fiercely and keenly as if she had clamoured for his love on her knees, love that she had come out to fetch, and which a man has seldom the courage to withhold when a woman not absolutely ugly, asks for it point-blank.

She burrowed under the bed-clothes at the hateful thought, then set her little teeth hard, and vowed that it should not master her, that she would resist to the death this *love* that made dolls of most people, and beasts of some.

And yet, methinks, that poor woman who tossed wakeful on her couch but a few yards away from Easter, who had flung down all her treasure royally for pure love, asking no bond, expecting no return, was richer perhaps than Easter, who drew back from that fiery furnace out of which many a sinful woman had emerged with soul white as snow.

What is the sun in the sky but another

form of love? It shines out and we are glad, it hides its face, and we are wretched. It draws out all hidden loveliness and sweets, and why should tears come to our eyes, beholding the joy it creates, unless indeed it is in most human touch with our human hearts?

God is Light, God is Love, God is all that fructifies in our heart, and warms us to our fellow-humans, and Hate is the Cold and Darkness in which we shudder and pine with curses on our lips, and despair in our hearts, longing for the day.

“The finest art,” exclaims Joubert, “is full of life and hope.” And in strongest rebuke he says elsewhere, “With the fever of the senses, the delirium of the passions, the weakness of the spirit, with the storms of the passing time, and with the scourges of humanity—hunger, thirst, dishonour, diseases and death—authors may go on as long as they will, making novels which shall

harrow up our hearts, but the soul says all the while, 'You hurt me.'” Wherefore, let us turn our faces not towards the darkness, but to Light.



CHAPTER XVIII.

“Content to see
An unseized heaven dying at his feet.
Content, O ! fool, to make a cold retreat.”

IN that absolutely clear mental five minutes (occasionally a fearful quarter of an hour) usually towards morning, when our souls sit up naked, and stare us in the face, we having put off the robe we wore yesterday, and not yet assumed the fleshly cloak of to-day, Basil opened his eyes, broad awake in the fresh country bed chamber with its dimity curtains, and having cursed the rack punch that the moon had transformed into a love-philtre, asked himself with almost brutal cynicism where, if Daddy Gardner had not come when he did last night, he—Basil Strokoff—would be now?

Up to that time Easter had shown as much

control of herself as he had done, and that a girl in one of the provinces should acquire by intuition what only the severest discipline could teach a man of the world, was in itself a somewhat baffling and irritating fact, so that when he had caught her at unawares, and for a moment she had seemed to be plastic, almost the instrument of his will, he had exulted over her weakness, while her loveliness had appealed to his senses, and made him feel. She was no longer impersonal to him, to be admired like a flower or a sunset, she was a woman—and Basil divided women into two classes, the adorable, and the not to be adored, and for him the former class did not exist.

Well, he had had this fever often before, and recovered, and would recover again. “The best way to overcome our passions is to indulge them,” says the cynical St. Evremonde, and Ruskin declares there is more time wasted in resisting temptation than in anything else on

earth, only Basil could not in this instance so cure himself, and to him marriage was a horror, he knew himself thoroughly, what he could do, and what he could not, and the woman was not born to whom he could swear faithfulness. It is the same with many other men—and they marry all the same—but he had queer ideas on that point, and would not swear falsely. He had the misfortune to realise the fact, and the courage not to shut his eyes to it, and his training did not fit him to be that which every model wife or husband must be—narrow.

And if to the girl every step is unknown, delicious, to the man it is the same old mill round—he knows it all beforehand, every step and turning, even when he is showing her the way for the first time, and oftentimes he grows so sick of it, that he deliberately goes out of his way to avoid any influence that will throw out of due proportion the other amusements of his life.

The man who has not learned to say "No" has not mastered the first lesson in manliness, or taken the first step on that path of strenuous endeavour that leads to success. He will go through life a weather-cock, jeered at by all, and to himself a hollow wind bag instead of a sturdy man who makes a wall of his own backbone.

And Basil had sternly said "No" to many things he had greatly desired in his life, perhaps it was because he had neither to say "No" nor "Yes" to Lala Hoyos that she had made herself in a way indispensable to him, though he knew very well that if it came to the question of a life-long companionship with her, he would uncompromisingly answer in the negative.

And Easter was a temptation. *On revient toujours*, and he had come back to his first impression of her—a little school girl out walking at Fairmile who had violently attracted him—and he was difficult of

attraction, and all his life long had never cared much for anything he could get easily—this being perhaps the only touch of commonplace in his character.

And the *verve* and abandon with which she had played that game of Touch-last, tingled in his veins yet. She had left him hungry—and a man will recollect to the fraction of an inch the piece of bread he coveted when he was starving, and forget the many *plats* of which he partook, when full.

And if he had caught her, and beaten her that night, or if he had kissed her under the apple-trees when Daddy surprised them, Basil would not, for he knew himself well, be thinking of Easter now.

He had not been able to forget her. He had interposed Lala between himself and the girl—and the girl had shown clean through the woman as through a transparency, and vermeil-tinted, radiant with a loveliness surely

more of earth than Heaven, her eyes alight with something that he had kindled there, for which he was responsible, Easter seemed to stand as if summoned in the flesh at that very moment before him.

He had brought that look there. It was a look that he knew—with all the promise and the failure, the glory and the disillusion that some men can contemplate unmoved—but that Basil never could, and even denied himself, and went out of his way to avoid . . . and this was a debt of honour, and how was he to pay it honourably? It did not occur to him to run away again to Lala, and excuse himself with a lie to Mr. Denison, and he had timed himself here for two days, and after that was not going on to Scotland as Jem supposed, but on serious business to Russia, that inclement stepmother who gives back so little for the blood, the treasure, and the love her children lavish upon her, yet to whom the heart of the true Muscovite ever turns

with unspeakable longing, while dearer to him than all the glories of the earth are her dreary steppes and desolate plains.

And it is strange but true, and probably one can say it of no other mother country, but Russia, proud and exacting, takes precedence in her children's hearts of even the love of women, and men will walk over the hearts and bodies of those who worship them, to pass on and serve *her*—to inscribe their names as martyrs of “the coming Russia.”

Perhaps it was because of this shadow, projected grimly out of the future on his path, that Basil had long ago decided that no legal bonds should ever shackle him. Had he wished for family ties, if his happiness had laid in that direction, I think he would have gone and lived in the East, where a man's moral character compares so favourably with that of his timid, law-bound, yet law-defying brothers of the West. The man in the East

has several wives, and there is no sin, no scandal. The wives know their position, the man knows his—there is complete dignity on both sides—and truth. And naturally each woman makes herself as agreeable as possible to that man in the hope that she may be first. With the Europeans, on the contrary, the same polygamous life is lived, but in secret, with all the attendant and degrading circumstances of a life founded on deceit and lies. In the end nearly everybody is found out, and then come recriminations, violences, retaliations in kind of speech and action, disgrace and sometimes murder, and all because we are too cowardly to look things squarely in the face. And if we will not do that, let men learn self-control, even as frail women learn it, or let all good women refuse to give their hearts where they cannot look up to a man with that thrill of pride that is worth all the love and passion she has it in her to feel.

Basil ended by doing what most men in

difficulties (and few women) do—he fell asleep. When he woke up because he was called, he thought first, and with positive refreshment of Nan, whose influence had sometimes asserted itself at awkward moments at Fitzwalters, and when he had got into his shooting clothes, laid out overnight by a reproachful valet who immediately returned to Town, Basil breakfasted, then walked through the town to Penroses. For once the house-door was open and Basil could hear prayers going on in the breakfast room on the right, and he heard something else too, a rush of feet down the stone stair-case, and guessed that it was some laggard descending, all too late, and the next moment Easter ran head-foremost into his arms. She was all warm and lovely with sleep, but conscious only of her shabby shoes, her pink calico jacket, while he was sweeping her very soul for something in it that he feared, but did not wish to find . . . it was not there . . . and he drew a long breath of

relief. She did not love him—therefore he loved her.

Tom's voice ceased. The First had curtailed the Prayer Book. A door opened sharply—the servants filed out. Prayers were over, and Basil and Easter walked into the breakfast-room together.



CHAPTER XIX.

“ To deal with proud men is but pain,
For either must ye fight or flee,
Or else nae answer make again,
But play the beist, and let him be.”

To cross a mixen to enjoy the pleasures of melancholy is not a poetical proceeding, but the stress and worry of a large family will excuse anything, and Easter, escaping that afternoon to the tallet, a roomy apartment devoted to hay and straw over the stable, made pious ejaculations mainly recognisant of her own cleverness in discovering such a hiding-place, as she climbed the wobbly ladder that gave entrance to it.

She paused at the top, and thrust out her foot in its neat stocking—her most passionate regret being that she had not worn her second-best shoes that morning. Not what you

felt, but “What did you wear?” is the first question asked by one maiden of another when hearing a love story—at least until she is turned twenty.

“I had on a pink cotton jacket and an old skirt,” thought Easter, though Basil’s glance had shewn her to herself, sweet as a meadow at five o’clock in the morning, “and you may be tidy all the year round without a soul to see you, and a slut when it’s death to you not to look your very best! The women *he* is used to, don’t get up at all—their maids put them together by degrees—and Basil has seen a good many heads curled and—put on, or he wouldn’t have looked so astonished at the way that honeysuckle came off without *me*!”

She stopped thinking, for wheels were turning in at the barken gates—dog-cart wheels—and what earthly ill luck could bring the Chief back so early?

The next moment a man’s voice shouted for a groom, and she shrank back electrified;

for the voice was Basil's, and he was evidently alone—alone, and pray who had he come to see?

Apparently no one responded, for she heard him get out, open the stable door, and then—and then she peeped over to see him on the other side of the mixen, stooping to pick up a handkerchief, and before she could stir, he had looked up, seen her, and in a flash the steps beneath her were trembling under his weight.

She retreated before that vigorous ascent, and in sheer self-defence sat down on a truss of hay that yielded a cloud of fine aromatic dust, which half choked and blinded her, and so powerfully does discomfort affect even matters of love, that with intense irritation Easter thought how suitable it was for the farce she and Basil had been playing, that it should begin and end—in a sneeze.

The sneeze came, and she felt that she loathed him, for a true woman would rather

not be seen at all than in a ridiculous situation, and then she remembered her clean white frock with a sense of comfort—also her shoes.

He came and stood over against her.

“I wanted to see you,” he said, “so I left your father and Burghersh shooting over the coverts of Wynyard’s Gap, took French leave with the dog-cart”—he paused—“but I suppose if you had not happened to drop your pocket-handkerchief, I should not have found you at all.”

Easter’s heart hardened. Had she not been dropping her handkerchief to him all the way along, and now was she to be grateful because at the eleventh hour he picked it up?

She had turned away from him, and he could see nothing but the lovely curves of her neck, and part of her cheek, rose-soft against the dark locks about which the dusty motes flew, and I think that at the moment it

was her intense femininity that appealed most strongly to him, for femininity is almost an obsolete art, even as masculinity is so rare as to evoke our warmest admiration when we do come across it.

He did not know what he had come here to say. He only knew that standing in his "warm corner," an imperious desire to see her had laid hold of him, and he had obeyed it, as he did most instincts, and now there was nothing to do but offer her an apology for not being able to love her sufficiently, to beg forgiveness for the insult he had offered her in coming to Penroses, and pass out of her life—never to come into it again.

She felt that coldness in the air, knew by an intangible something that this was not love, not love, he had come to tell her, and through all her humiliation the warm, nostril-tickling smell of the hay irritated her intensely . . . who shall say that we are not slaves to sentiment, and that the cool

dewy scents of a meadow transfigured by moonlight had not as much to do with Easter's yielding mood overnight, as this intolerable atmosphere with making her think Basil, and everything to do with Basil, detestable?

"Let me pass," she said, with a gesture in which was the pride of Lucifer, and with a tingling sense in her whole body that this was Lala's lover who had come here to make a sport of her, and to laugh at her to his heart's content with Lala afterwards. . . .

He barred her way—he had no idea of letting this wild, beautiful thing, out of whom he had struck fire at last, go so easily, and his eyes seemed to illuminate her to herself as some high-mettled, show creature to be valued, not for that inner indestructible self that was her own, and no accidental gift of Nature, but for the pleasure she was able to afford the beholder, and every drop of blood in her body boiled at the thought.

“You brute !” she said, and struck him with her whole force full on the cheek.

“If you do that again, Easter,” he said, without blenching, “I’ll kiss you,” and, then he saw that the tears were streaming down her cheeks, and shame filled his soul.

“Dear little woman,” he cried distractedly, “hit me again.—I’m a beast and a devil, and I came to ask you to forgive me, and I’ve insulted you worse than ever——”

But Easter sobbed on, the crown of her dark head close to his shoulder, all the wounded pride, and fret, and waiting of the past weeks sweeping in storm through her soul, and Basil could do nothing but take his punishment like a man, since he dared not offer the only consolation in his power. And yet, how well a man might have loved her if . . . if . . .

“I’ve been a sweep right through,” he said, “and I can’t make myself any different. I am not fit to tie yours, or any good woman

shoestring. Will you just say, 'I forgive you, Basil, and God bless you?' I don't suppose He will, but it would do me a lot of good if you *could* say it."

She looked up in his face, but her lips trembled, and no words came. For a moment I think that the helplessness of love—real love—touched her, and he knew it, and trembled and wavered; but the momentary loss of his self-mastery gave her back hers, for she quietly unlocked the hands that were drawing hers greedily up to his breast.

"Good-bye, Basil, and God bless you!" she said.

She heard his swift feet descending the ladder, so might hasten a man hard pressed for his life, and face downwards on the hay Easter wept her heart out for what she did not desire, but longed most passionately to call her own.

Book ii.—The Bite.

CHAPTER I.

“ Learn to mak’ your bed, Annie,
And learn to tie your lane ;
I got thee as a waif woman,
I’ll leave thee as the same.”

“ AND then,” said Eighteen-and-a-half, in a fine careless way, “ things got horrid. The Chief was morose and unbearable, mother like a wet blanket—the Shavers were insulting, and as Dinkie said, ‘ We should soon be a Book of Lamentations, our loose leaves floating about the world.’ But Jem was always cheery, and kind, and when he asked father to give his consent to our getting married—in case he got mine—what do you think the Chief did ? Swore he’d never give his consent to my marrying

anybody ! Of course, this made Jem almost desirable, and when a man is importunate, and a nuisance, and always worrying you to run away with him, why, what can you do but marry him to get rid of him ? So we ran. We ran rather a long way for fear father should catch us ; but I wonder you haven't heard all about it ! ”

This conversation owed its untrammelled ease to the fact that Jem, immediately after arriving at Fairmile with Easter, had been sent out for a walk, and told to come back in an hour's time. Now, imagine the easy unconcern with which a young woman sends her victim tramping about in all weathers while she sits cosily within doors talking confidentially with a friend ; and just fancy if he told *her* to take herself off, and not come back till he and his pal had done their smoke and gossip ! It is in the robust exercise of such privileges as these, that one occasionally feels the privilege of being a woman.

“And where were you married?” enquired Hugon, who, in the dull school parlour, that told nothing of human life or enjoyment, looked less like a woman than a suppressed identity in her coarse black gown.

“Jem got a special license,” said Easter, “and carried it about in his pocket for months, only I didn’t know it. One day, when everything at home had been maddening, and a fearful row was on about my last new frock, which I had carefully forgotten to tell mother about, and Dinkie had been nasty, and said he wasn’t going to imperil his immortal soul by getting any more citrons and having them put down in the family bills, Jem said to me, ‘Come over to the Shaw, dear, and you shall have as many new frocks and preserved citrons as ever you like, so go and put on your hat.’ ‘I will, Jem, I will,’ I said, and what did he do but drive me round to a funny little office a couple of miles away, where a funny little old man married us——”

“The registrar?”

“I suppose so, and I with only a blue serge frock on, and an old fur cap and boa, and out we walked, man and wife! Jem had got a wedding ring in his pocket— isn’t it a *thick* one?—he really did it all very neatly, and I quite admired him for it!

“We didn’t dare to show up at the Shaw,” concluded Easter, loosening the rough black furs in which she glowed like a moss cup—that wax-like wonder of purest carmine (found oftenest in bogs, and requiring as sedulous a search as Truth herself) that is the nearest approach in Nature to translucent human flesh, for the colour seems to breathe outward, as if a light were behind it, even as the glory of young blood in a fresh young face. “And it was just as well we did not. Father raised Cain, pulled all the blinds down, as if there had been a death in the family, allowed no one to go to church the following Sunday, and formally erased my name from the family

concordance! Then he gave everybody except mother chapters in the Bible to learn, kicked Sweet William round the premises, had some fun with all the fire-irons and crockery, and gradually recovered. We only came back from abroad yesterday—it rather took the edge off it, you know—going abroad.”

“Took the edge off it!” Hugon repeated the words—blankly.

“Well, you see,” said Easter frankly, “it’s dull—I miss Nan and the boys—and even to catch Bunkulorum eating snails would be something, I hadn’t really time to get sick of those at home, there were too many of them. Now, what person, or dish, or gown could you live with straight on end, for ever and ever, and *not* get sick of? If I were a woman of fashion I’d change my furniture and the colour of my hair at least, once a month, and I’m not sure I wouldn’t change my husband, too, sometimes!”

“I daresay,” said Hugon.

Her voice matched the lean room, the bare table, the crayon-decked walls, the Prayer Book and Bible that lay on a small table near, one felt instinctively that the Calvary should be hanging on the wall as the spiritual epitome of this sad woman's life, who yet was intensely human, and trying with all her might to keep calm, for the strain upon Hugon was growing greater with every hour. When you do what is within your power, nature looks on, pleased and happy. But when you try to do more, the instinct of self-preservation asserts itself and cries, "Stop!" and because you don't or can't, spoils your spirits, and your temper, and you worry other people, while everybody exclaims what a brute you are! It is only Nature's way of rebelling against unjust burdens, Nature, who is artistic, and revolts at pain, not even admitting it in her scheme of earthly happiness.

Easter felt the atmosphere depressing, and looked out at the bald-headed croquet ground

from which all signs of summer occupation were now gone, and round which ran the moderately high wall that had supported the arms and chins of almost every young man in the neighbourhood, when she adorned the school, but now weeds grew in the crevices, and the garden mould of the houses on either side grew flowers instead of footsteps.

“But he is a dear old thing,” cried Easter, in a burst of repentance, and “probably he is no duller as a husband than any other man would be! He has deteriorated, of course—too much happiness makes every body deteriorate—and I’m in agonies he is developing a tendency to *fat*, still he’s as good as possible, and when I don’t see too much of him, he hardly bores me at all! Of course one doesn’t *want* a man in town—but I’m looking forward with real dread to his undiluted company at the Shaw!”

“Yet we never get tired of ourselves, Easter,” said Hugon gravely.

“Of course not; that’s so easy, because we love ourselves, and we know our own good points as no one else possibly can, and it’s quite different. I do believe dulness is at the bottom of pretty well every crime and *bêtise* in the world.”

“So it is a *bêtise*?” said Hugon grimly.

Easter did not reply, she had gone to the window and stood looking out. “Do you remember,” she said, “how Betsy and Harriet put their knees to vile usage in picking up the Catherine-wheels, and rockets, and things, those young men fired off on the fifth of November—all for me—and how I slept peacefully through everything on the other side of the house, and never saw one of them? And the letters fastened to the doorpost, all slants and black lines, which you could only read if you held the sheet almost upside down, and the ardent love songs supposed to come from the music seller——?”

She paused, and her glance wandered to

the Prayer - book as if it evoked certain memories.

“It looks like my old one,” she said, “the one in which—in which Basil hid his love-letters.”

Hugon looked at the girl as uncomprehendingly as one stone gargoyle might at another.

“So you wear your big black hats still, Easter,” she said.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Burghersh, absently. “Hugon, I want to tell you something. When I was being married to Jem, if I had looked round, and Basil had come in at the door and called to me, I should have pulled my hand out of Jem’s, and gone to him—there! But now,” she added, triumphantly, “he has no influence over me—none! I could meet him, and be kind to him, and even *like* him, but I shall never be in the least afraid of him again! And I’ve come to the conclusion that if you don’t *let* anything

—love, or disease, or worry—catch on to you, but keep moving—always moving—you may be tired, but you won't be ill of it! And it was a splendid idea," she went on, with that lilt in her voice peculiar to young things who think they have suffered, but have certainly gathered no experience from their sufferings, "going abroad; after all, those poor Johnnies who call a music hall, a painted face, a bottle of champagne, or a *fracas* 'seeing life,' are not so far wrong—poor silly Johnnies that they are—for it is *movement*—it is not sitting down, and stagnating—do you ever see *him* now?" she added abruptly, and turning her head away.

"Jem? You have taken very good care that I shall not," said Hugon, wilfully misunderstanding her.

"*Jem!* O, I'll send *him* down on the next half-holiday to spend the whole of it with you! It will be such a treat to get rid of him! Come in," she added impatiently, as

that gentleman entered the drawing-room much as a big St. Bernard may who is anxious to propitiate, but fearful of certain feline dangers of which he has previously had some experience.

“It’s awfully cold out of doors,” he said, looking very nipped and blue. “Have you two nearly had your talk out, because I’m afraid our train leaves in half-an-hour?”

He did not even see Hugon, his face was turned towards his wife, not to one side, or so as to lose the least little bit of her, but aware of her only, as she flourished the ends of her boa at him.

“Come and persuade Hugon to return to town, and do a play with us to-night—for, if we have been dull, she has been duller!” explained Easter.

Jem kissed her. It was one of those ways that she could not get him out of, and even while he put his hat down, his eyes never left her—faithful as the sheep dog to the face of his master.

“Jem,” said Easter, frowning, “you are hopeless. Are we *always* to be 'Arry and 'Arriet in public? Doesn't he make a capital Johnnie?” she added, surveying him, “there's nothing like a first-rate tailor for finishing a man, if Nature has given him a good start!”

“How do you think she is looking?” said Jem, addressing Hugon. After all there was no help for it, Easter was at the top of everything and he couldn't open his mouth, but she popped out.

“But you don't look at all well yourself,” he added kindly, as he withdrew his eyes from Easter to take a cursory glance at the governess. “You had much better come back with us to Long's—I'm sure the old ladies would let you.”

Hugon smiled faintly, and shook her head.

“Come down both of you, and see me when you can. Do you stay long?”

“O, some little time,” said the young

beauty carelessly, and Jem's face fell.

"There are my things——"

She paused, feeling by instinct all the danger and solemnity of a country girl plunged unprepared into the immorality of—clothes.

"And they will take all your life," said Hugon, who knew that in sumptuary laws Easter never erred. "Perhaps be——" she stopped, having almost said, "the saving or the ruin of you."

"And they are so fascinating," said Easter eagerly. "It is so odd to find out that one has never even tried on before the colours that suit one best!"

Jem looked admiringly at his wife, as if she were discoursing with the wisdom of Solon, and indeed that touch of folly without which no woman can be well loved by man, was encouraged by Jem in Easter, for it is the weaknesses of these rare and costly creatures that put them more on a level with poor ordinary man.

“Talk of the Johnnies,” said Jem, inflating his chest proudly, “you should just see the people fall on their noses when Easter comes along—the very men I know don’t see me, in looking at her! But we must be off, darling——”

“Silly old man!” said Easter, as he put her nodding black hat on crooked, and she went to the glass to put it straight, “but he has one virtue—he is not a tidy man, an odious creature who is always putting the blinds and screens straight, and you too, very likely! Good-bye, dear, I’ll come again the very first minute I have—tell the old ladies I’m awfully sorry they were out!”

And in a final skirmish of attempted and repudiated caresses, the handsome young couple crossed the hall, and went down the steps, and without a single backward look, frolicked out of sight.

A bitter March wind tore at, and hustled Hugon’s coarse gown, and the cold struck its

talons cruelly into her breast, but she did not feel it as she went back into the house, for her thoughts were turned inward—directed at something that she felt to be there, but which yet eluded her, and must be dragged forth alone, with no human eye upon her.

She went swiftly up the staircase, and into a room that was not even all her own, and standing in the middle of it stood perfectly still, drew a deep, long breath—and *knew*.

The knowledge went through her like fire, and she tingled with its strength, thrilled with its ecstasy . . . she loved, and her love was her own. She did not even think of the object as a possible sharer in it, hers were the joys, the intense riches of it, and she let the flood fill and overflow her heart as it would . . . for once in her life of starved, resisting senses she was wise, and offered no resistance . . . it had its way, enveloping her like a flame from heaven, whether to burn her life in ashes, or ennoble

it through supremest joy and suffering, who shall say? For Love the creator, is oft-times the destroyer, too. Only this I know that she could not help it—that Love does not ask you if you will receive him, and if you can hold parley with him — if you can demand his credentials, and coldly examine them, then he is not Love, but Love's bastard brother, and has not power to inspire you with the strongest instinct implanted in the human breast.

Jem . . . only *Jem*. Only a kind, manly fellow, who had always been good to her—whom she had got used to, till it had half killed her to do without him. Easter's lover — Easter's husband — nothing to the stranger-woman, if to her he was—*Jem*. To others he might seem an ordinary man—but she knew better. Bit by bit his character had revealed itself to her—though it was not for his character that she loved him, but because, through him, her birthright of

humanity—her faith in human nature, had been restored to her; because in him she found the godship, not the predatory and baser instincts of man.

For so it is, and ever will be, that the woman who has been violently tempted in the worst part of her nature, is more prone to fall through her higher instincts than she who has felt no such violent recoil against evil, and therefore is incapable of appreciating the good, and, but for Hugon's past, she could not have idealized Jem as she did—or deemed him so worthy of worship.

Memory was plucking even now at her skirts—cruel memory that takes all the heart out of us, and for ever and ever is the murderer of hope, and the bane of all strenuous endeavour. How many of us do not pray passionately every day, "Take away memory, dear God, that for ever clutches us down when we put out our whole strength to climb up to Thee, Thou, who gavest Hope,

unloose from us the fetters of the past!" We could be new men and women to ourselves, and influence others for good, were we suffered to forget the many blunders we have committed, and dare to look forward to the glorious things that we feel, and know we have the power in us to accomplish, if only that burden might fall from us but it may not.

Only for once, Hugon rose above hers, for few women have the capacity to love as boundlessly as she loved, and merely to have that power was, as she somehow divined, not to have lived in vain. The cup that will contain the greatest measure of sorrow is fashioned also to hold an equal amount of joy, and no matter what this woman's sins might be, love had reckoned her soul a meet instrument on which to strike his fullest, richest chord, and the music would go on for ever, helping to swell the world's harmony, long after the instrument itself was broken.

Love had come to her—to her, the poor, the despised . . . Pity her not, O! careless, happy ones of the earth, over-surfetted with worship, for after all, God has not passed this woman by, and for a brief space at least, she has “won the hills of heaven.” The joy of giving—so infinitely greater than that of receiving, is hers, and she asks no more; for that is the glory of true love, that he brings his own blessing with him, and turns the barest dungeon into a treasure-house meet for God.

It will not endure . . . all too quickly will its glory fade and pass . . . but O! to have known that joy—to have once entered into that kingdom, even if you must pass out of it with bitter weeping—is to have absolutely fulfilled the one law that Christ gave unto us: “Love one another.” It is only a leap from the state of mind in which one goes on living, because it is less trouble than dying, to the highest pinnacle of human

happiness, and there is only one influence, earthly, heavenly, human, or spiritual, that can enable you to take it—and that is Love. Hugon had taken that leap blindfold, and no matter what had been before, or might come after, she had, for however brief a space, tasted the highest good.

A school-bell rang. Hugon rose from the ground on which she had sunk—no longer poor; her eyes

“Have seen a new tinge in the western skies . . .
The world has done its duty.”



CHAPTER II.

“ There is a wheel in human affairs, which, continually revolving, does not suffer the same person to be always successful.”

—HERODOTUS.

THERE was a sharp touch in the air that made Jem think, by some odd law of association, of the frost sparkling on cabbage leaves, or the congealed dew in a belated October raspberry, and yet the time of year was early spring, and the place was somewhere about the middle of Bond Street—that narrow, ill-built, cosy, intimate thoroughfare which may be likened to a microscope, under which you observe your friends, and they you, so impossible is it to overlook anything or anybody—wherefore is it so beloved. A *causerie*, a flirtation—a little shopping—a

display of one's horses, one's frocks, or one's new man—can be conducted there with a completeness impossible in any other town resort, and, depend upon it, the reason the Mall ceased to be the fashion was because it was too big for the proper study of mankind—and his clothes.

“It's like being in one's own kitchen garden,” said Jem, snuffing up the air with keenest relish, “it's the wind that does it,” and he held on to his hat with both hands, while Easter clung to her furs. “Good old wind!” and in thought he followed it over his own hedgerows and furrows, where it was hustling bud and seedling into busy, all-absorbing life, and shouting out its cry of “Hurry! Hurry!” to which a million voices responded with “Here! Here!” so glad were they to be called—so rejoiced to be there to answer!

For, if the sun be the source of warmth, of life, of creation, is not the wind God's own

spirit breathing itself into our souls, a living mediator between Him and us?

Nature is never so transcendently lovely when the wind has laid down to sleep, as when with all its airs and graces it plays about her. Where would be the bravery of her green flags and pennons without the wind to unscroll them? Where the perfume in flower and leaf, did not the breeze rifle and scatter them abroad? Even the shadow that sweeps across the plain in a single stride is more wind than cloud, and half the surprises, the play of light and shade that chase the earth with smile and frown, are not sun effects at all, but frescoes painted by the wind.

Easter ought to have been a fishmongeress by trade, for she never could get past that scent of salmon and lemon-juice, just dashed with violets, that seems *sui generis* to a Bond Street fish shop, but she tore herself away at last, and Jem's face and hers shewed clear

as two suns among the murky-skinned folk around, to one of two people who were sauntering slowly towards them.

The man was looking at something on the other side of the street, but as the two couples came abreast of each other, the wind seizing Easter's boa, and undoubling, and twisting it like a snake, lassoed and made prisoner—Basil Strokoff.

He put up his hands to free himself, faced round, and saw only Easter—Jem seemed to have melted into the surrounding throng—his eyes flashing unmistakable joy as he took her hand, and searched her face for some sign of those tears he so vividly remembered.

“Pray introduce me,” said Lala's cold voice at his elbow, and he did so—as Miss Denison.

“Not Miss Denison,” said Jem, advancing apparently out of the nearest shop-window, “Melons is Miss Denison now!”

For a moment everything round Basil

faded. He had refused to pay the highest price a man can pay for his fancy—some one else had bought it, and it was happy. There was no mistaking the happiness of the dazzling white and rose face under its fur hat, and over the eyes was drawn a curtain, wifely or otherwise, that he had no power to lift, even had he so willed it.

“Have you been long in town?” said Lala Hoyos, with that intonation which at once fixes a woman’s status in the world, “and where are you staying?”

“We came back the day before yesterday. We are at Long’s.”

“And I may call, I suppose?” said Lala languidly, who had mapped out a whole plan of campaign in less than a minute, for a woman will go quivering through the whole gamut of human hopes, and fears, and joys, while a man is putting on his boots, or anathematising an ill-cut coat. She is capable of doing this many times in a day,

and reaping glorious victories, and suffering desperate defeats without the colour in her cheek ever changing, or a single cry escaping her lips.

“Certainly.”

Easter’s voice was indifferent. She too was preoccupied, and studying Basil in the totally new character of a man about town. His coat was a mystery—the light upon his hat had never shone on land or sea, and her eyes sought Jem, and mutely reproached him and his tailor combined.

“Will you come and dine to-morrow?” said Lala, “deadly dull, of course, in Lent, but you must feed somewhere, and why not with us?”

“We are going to a play,” said Easter, with the faintest accent on the “we” that scored a black mark under the “us.”

Yet she was so new to everything that she changed colour, sweetly and softly as the dawn comes up in the sky, and “There’s

nothing on earth," thought Lala, "that makes such a fool of a man (through his eyes) as colour." The habit of arriving is easy, the art of getting yourself away gracefully requires assiduous practice, and as Basil's hat was seldom on his head, and Lala seemed to know five out of every six persons who passed, the knot on the pavement seemed somewhat difficult to untie.

"Who is the new beauty?" eagerly enquired one of Basil's friends in his ear.

"No one you know," said Basil. His pliant lips were calm as usual, some people wear their emotions outside—some in. Basil belonged to the former class.

When at last they divided, uncomfortably, not like the human puppets who are stowed away nightly in their box to meet again shrieking, and dancing on the morrow, to begin over again their pantomime of yesterday, Basil put Lala into her carriage, and did not return with her to lunch—as usual.

“I must make friends with the woman,” she thought, as her horses traversed the short distance to Park Lane. “I wonder who turns her out?” (She was herself the best turned-out woman in town.) Basil had not missed a single point in Easter, but men as a rule skip detail, though nearly always the whole effect of a woman’s beauty is produced of etched-in touches very apparent to a rival, who will put her finger on the exact spot where Nature fails, and art steps in.

“She is not in love with him,” thought Mrs. Hoyos, as she walked into the house. “I wish she were, for there are many men in the world, but only one Basil.”

And Easter cried in her sleep that night, and woke Jem up to tell him she was playing a game that she *wanted* to win, but which she was losing, losing fast.

CHAPTER III.

“According to your own disposition, you judge of the ways of others.”

—PLAUTUS.

THE balconies of Lala Hoyos' house were not yet filled for the season, but their winter trimmings made them cosy for all that, and a healthy clean smell of spring flowers (something like a mignonette bed in September) met you on the threshold highly suggestive of Arcadian tastes, and an impeccable moral atmosphere.

No one ever saw a blatant butler in Lala's house, the servants were suave, courtly even, in their manners, like those royal carriages that are just like those of anybody else, save for the quiet perfection of the men's plain black liveries, and fresh gloves, and unobtrusive good breeding.

Most of us do before night what we have sworn nothing on earth shall induce us to do when we get up in the morning, which was the reason, I suppose, that Easter found herself in Lala Hoyos' drawing-room, with the faithful Jem in attendance, when she had passionately averred wild horses should not draw her over that threshold, only it was so much less trouble to call, praying that Mrs. Hoyos might be out, than to go on refusing her assiduous attentions!

Black polished floors, tiger skins whose cat-like heads of colossal proportions tripped up the unwary, a great deal of old green and yellow marquetric furniture, with rich hangings of cunningly blended colours to match, palms in huge *cloisonné* jars that reached like trees to the ceiling, a lot of screens, and china that lent itself to the colour scheme of the whole, with everywhere flowers, and great store of green leaves to back them, and glimpses through an archway of another

room almost filled by a broad barbaric couch covered with tiger-skins and piled with silken cushions of green and yellow, such was Lala Hoyos' drawing-room, and Easter felt that a liberal education must have gone to create these harmonies, then thought disparagingly of the rich tones, and glorious window-scapes of the Hangingshaw.

Such books as lay about, showed that Mrs. Hoyos was entirely free of the vice of promiscuous reading, for whatever you found in her house was worth looking at twice. She made it a rule never to read anything that was not signally stamped with the *cachet* of success, and had been heard to say that when a book has been out a fortnight, and no woman seems to know anything about it, you may be quite sure that book ought never to have been written. It does not depend at all on the critics, the public is its own taster now, and the success of a book is made by what women say about it at dinner tables, or in

their dressing-rooms, in the letters they write to their friends in the country—in every place in short where women congregate, and exchange ideas.

“Awfully dodgy arrangement,” said Jem, sinking into a big chair with deep pockets of brocade on either side of it, and in which he looked exactly like a donkey between panniers, as Easter promptly informed him. “Capital thing this, for holding one’s brandy and soda. I wish you’d get one like it for the Shaw.”

Easter went over to the bow window, and looked out.

“How I wish,” she said, “that the Hangingshaw looked on the Park!”

“I’m jolly glad it doesn’t,” said Jem, who did not change his likings and moods as a woman does, twenty times a day. “Town’s a hole—and I’d hoped, dear, you’d be nearly sick of it by now.”

He tried to look miserable, but could not, for wherever Easter was, was Heaven.

“Why, I do believe,” said Easter, stooping to look at a photograph on a table near, “I hadn’t the least idea”—her voice sank to a whisper, “that she had got any *children*——”

But indeed she had. Lala’s babies, judiciously sprinkled over fifteen years of matrimony, and carefully kept in evidence, had been extremely useful, and enabled her to keep up appearances, and do just as she pleased, all along the line.

She came in just then with a small toddler holding to her skirts, and Easter, looking at the mother through the child, felt herself blush at past thoughts of her, as they touched hands.

Air, harmony, space, sweetness—and Lala pouring out tea, a cherub’s hand twisted in a fold of her skirt . . . such was the outward rendering of the town-lady who in the meadow at Penroses had been succinctly summed up by Daddy as “the Devil and all his Works.”

Jem with each gulp of tea drowned a prejudice against Mrs. Hoyos. She was a fashionable woman, no doubt, and perhaps too little given to avoiding the appearance of evil—especially when she had as fine a contempt for her company as she had displayed at Fitzwalters, but her position was unassailable, and she could do Easter no harm.

When Lala chose to be charming, and she was a past mistress in manner, no man or woman either could resist her, and as she always discovered the subject nearest one's heart, she had soon plunged with Easter into the all-engrossing subject of clothes, which Jem bore for awhile, then began to fidget, and it was Mrs. Hoyos who suggested that he should go and pick up the latest scandal at his club—leaving Easter to drive with her, while Easter to her own astonishment, consented.

He went lingeringly, and as if he never expected to see his wife again, and Lala

laughed, though with something suspiciously like a tear in her cold eyes. In some odd way this little drama, in which she knew she would come out victorious, touched her, and the only person she felt sorry for was—Jem.

She went away presently to dress, and left alone, Easter walked over to a picture painted in oils of Basil Strokoff that, set on an easel, dominated all one end of the room, and in which for once, he had turned his real face to the artist—not that which he kept for the world. This one was as full of certainties as the faces of some are of possibilities—and failures, and the strength of his character was here really put out, though it would be hard to say in which direction he meant to use it. Easter was still looking at him, her little teeth set hard, when a softly opening door blew a whiff of clean primula scent towards her, and the polished floor echoed to a step that she knew. Had she moved away in time? She was looking down at Lala's now - closed

bureau, when Basil came over, and stood beside her. They had met several times lately, but this was the first occasion that they had been alone.

“Prince Strokoff,” she said, looking up at him gravely, when they had touched hands, “do you think Mrs. Hoyos would mind if I got one like this, for the Hangingshaw?”

“I really think you might venture.”

She was examining something else now. He could only see the back of her head, the gracious lines of a tall young shape in a velvet coat edged with sable, and what looked like a twist of sable on her head kept in place by a bunch of Neapolitan violets very like the sweeter cluster at her throat.

“I wish you would give me some tea,” he said, his hands in his pockets so that the frock coat which becomes so few men, but so eminently did him, was pushed back out of sight, and for a moment he looked the homelier Basil she had known at Penroses.

Easter poured it out standing, and praying for Lala to come down, though that lady, being informed of Basil's arrival, had not the faintest idea of hurrying herself—quite the reverse indeed, which was precisely Lala's way. She broke the back of every man's desire, by giving him an absolutely free hand in indulging it, and if Basil did not grow sick of Easter's company by having plenty of it, then it should not be her fault, and she knew very little of that gentleman indeed.

“It's quite cold,” said Easter, putting both her hands round the cup, in a housewifely tone.

“And we don't get such cream in town as at Penroses,” he said, helping himself to sugar, which she had forgotten.

“Do you remember it?” said Easter doubtfully.

“Yes; and how you asked me if I liked my cake with soda or——”

“O!” cried Easter, putting both hands to her little ears, “what savages you must have

thought us! It is only when I see you here, that I realize how utterly out of place you were at Penroses!"

He sat down on a low chair near her, and thoughtfully stirred his tea.

"Have you ever heard," he said, "of the Spadae who lived to invent new pleasures? Well, I was one of those fellows, and invented an entirely new one for myself, when I went to Penroses."

"Father liked you," said Easter, looking away, "and Nan—Nan never ceases to talk about you. We hope father will let her come up. I think she will go mad with joy when she sees you again."

"Dear Nan," he said heartily. "And you," he added quietly, "you were not glad to see me at all."

She made no reply, and he was keen to observe that her cheek remained cool. No, she was not—clearly she was not in the very least, afraid of him now.

He, too, was silent for a time, though he longed to ask her why she had married Burghersh. I think the men who most interest women are always those who keep something in reserve, even from themselves. A woman knows the strength is there, and trembles—this man controls himself, and can control her. Only if she too, have learned the lesson, she is more than his match, as in any question of moral pluck, a woman's is always greater than that of a man.

“And Dinkie,” she said calmly (and it suddenly crossed her mind how this was the first time she had really *conversed* with Basil in her life), “has gone into the business, and he does not like it at all.”

“And has Bunkulorum given up snails?” said Basil; “but you have given me no news about my old friend, the Chief.”

Easter's face fell.

“Father has been losing a lot of money,” she said, “and mother says he is not at all

well. We are hoping he will forgive us, when we go back to the Shaw."

"And did you run away?" said Basil, who being abroad, had missed the brief account of Easter's marriage in the papers.

"Yes."

"You must have been in a great hurry."

"We—we were."

"And you did not appear to be when I saw you last."

He had brought the blood into her face now with a vengeance, and at that moment Lala entered, buttoning her *suède* gloves as she came.

"So sorry," she said, nodding to Basil, "but everything went wrong to-day. I'm sure clothes get fits of temper, just like people sometimes. Coming with us, Basil?" she added carelessly, as she led the way downstairs.

"If I may. Has Burghersh any horses in Town?" he enquired presently, when with

astonishing quickness, considering Lala's blacks played cup and ball all the way, they turned in at the Park.

“ No. But if we come up for the season ” —she paused, and looked away at the just greening over tree-tops, at the people who walked beneath them, feeling all the exhilaration in the air that is surely at its keenest in early spring, and that makes us passionately desire to enjoy our gift of life to the uttermost.

“ And why don't you ? ” said Lala, who was above jealousy, and honestly respected a woman who could beat her on her own ground, for all her real friends were pretty, if not lovely, it made them so much better-tempered,” she said, “and so much more moral. It is only your ugly people who cannot resist temptation. The woman who has been saying ‘ No ’ all her life, has forgotten how to say ‘ Yes ’, while the woman who has never been even *asked* to say ‘ No ’

is so astonished, she answers in the affirmative from mere habit.

“And if you wait for anything you want till you can afford to have it,” said Lala airily, “make up your mind that you’ll never get it at all. If you possess a good gown, wear it, if you’ve got a smart thing to say, say it, or perhaps somebody else will wear your gown, and say your good thing for you, and when you get a chance of enjoying anything, enjoy it. Use up every odd and end you’ve got; don’t leave it for somebody else to have a high old time with — I’ve always respected misers, they’re so unselfish. So let me look out a house to suit you, Mrs. Burghersh, go home for Easter, and make sure of enjoying at least one season while you are young—and *so* young,” she added with a touch of envy in her voice.

But Easter, for all the swift movement, the gay surroundings, and intoxicating air, was wretched, for she had a feeling that the

carriage was too small to hold herself and Basil. When they had passed a great many people who all seemed to know Mrs. Hoyos and Prince Strokoff very well, it was with a sense of positive joy that she recognised, at no great distance, Jem's disconsolate back, and with great eagerness said she would get out, and join him.

"I—I'm *wretched* without my husband!" she said, and Lala smiled, and prodded her footman in the back with her parasol. He was used to this form of command, and the carriage drew up at the rails, while Jem, hearing himself called, looked round, and Lala, catching his expression at sight of Easter, asked herself if, after all, it might not be better to be the sun of one man's sky, than one of many stars in another one's firmament?

"Good-bye, don't forget you dine with us Friday," she said airily, as husband and wife went off together, and looking at Basil who

had also descended, and was leaning his arms on the carriage, the pair exchanged smiles.

“She is—*wretched* without him,” he said.

“It grew fatiguing,” she replied, making a little face. “Is she always so difficult? Yet the other day she was charming, and with such delightful simplicity of manner. Heavens! they have actually disappeared arm-in-arm! She’ll never be fit for any decent society in this world.”

“And meanwhile she’ll be uncommon,” said Basil. “Stick to her husband, you know, and that sort of thing, and you other women will peck her to death between you.”

Lala sighed.

“It is the *only* way to be uncommon,” she said, “but who is prepared to pay such a long price for fame?”

“Who indeed?” he said, as he laughed and went away.

Her spirits rose. Things were ranging themselves, and Easter was playing lavishly

into her hands. "Never let yourself go," she had once said to a friend, who had put too much heart into a love affair, with the worst possible results, "the moment you become a dead weight, leaning on a man's caprice, you become a nuisance, and are simply a woman who weighs as many stone as any other woman—rather more perhaps, and no angel at all."

Yet she had gone perilously near to falling into the same blunder herself, and it had taken time to remove the disagreeable impression she had made on Basil by bowling him out last autumn, but now in that pleasantest foretaste of the season that comes before the Passover, they had drifted into their old intimacy, and were as constantly together as before — indeed, their world would have been shocked had it been otherwise and remonstrated loudly, for Mrs. Grundy is never very angry about things that she knows, and is used to ; it is for the unknown

—what she can neither see, nor hear, nor sit in judgment upon—that she entertains a profound aversion and contempt. And the woman who is “born” may do anything.

Among the personages who came up to pay their respects to Mrs. Hoyos, while her carriage remained by the rails, was a graceful, slight man of fifty, whom she welcomed delightfully, conversed with on current topics, reminded that they dined out together that night, and who presently raised his hat, and passed on with the rest. He was her husband.

That amiable youth, Lord Hawkhurst, presently came by, and glad of something by which to support himself, propped himself up against the carriage door for conversation.

“Beastly wind, ain’t it?” he said, in exhausted tones. “Seen Burghersh and his wife? Everybody wants to know who she is—the few people who are here, you know. ’Pon my soul, now—do you think it can be real?”

“Her complexion? Quite. So is her stupidity.”

“Now, Lala,” said the young man, with languid severity, “it isn’t like you to be spiteful. That’s your charm—though you cut ’em all out, you don’t usually mangle ’em!”

“Ah, Bill,” she said, a little sadly, “when we women are young, the men charm us, when we are old, we charm the men. As a proof that men sometimes find me charming—I am old. Is not that Golightly? I thought he was ruined.”

“So he was,” said Billy, looking over his shoulder by dint of great exertion. “In his public exam. he said the causes were slow horses and fast women. Perhaps he’s reversed the process now, and got on his legs again. Aren’t you going to bow to poor Lady B——?” he added, a little colour coming into his bored face as a perfectly-appointed barouche, drawn by iron greys,

came slowly past, with a lovely, sad-faced woman inside it.

“She is a fool,” said Lala curtly, pausing to administer the cut direct, “and I took such pains with her too! But she never had the courage of her opinions. You must tweak Mrs. Grundy’s nose hard, before she’ll let you lead her by it.”

“But this is only a one-man affair,” said Billy, in aggrieved tones, “and she ran so straight up to then——”

“Too straight,” said Lala, drily. “You should never resist anything too long; it makes you so obstinate. And to ruin herself over such a mere trifle—a bagatelle like that! Oh,” she added, laughing at a sudden thought, “I must tell you something quite lovely. Phædra said to me last night——”

“Which?” said Billy plaintively. “There are no Penelopes, they are all Phædras nowadays. Some old buffer said that—I didn’t make it up, mind.”

“I mean the one who takes first honours, stupid,” said Lala. “Well, I was in her box at the theatre last night, and she said to me very earnestly: ‘You can’t *think* how fond I am of him—you have no *idea* what a good fellow he is!’ I asked her which. ‘Why, my husband,’ she said, to my utter consternation. ‘He behaved so *beautifully* to me about that affair with Jean—when Jean treated me so badly, you know; he sympathised with me so thoroughly, and was such a comfort to me, I have almost loved him ever since!’”

Billy laughed, but he was thinking how hard it was that the woman wrapped at birth in a purple garment, may do anything she likes—her worst escapades are winked at, and promptly hushed up, or ignored, even the immaculate ones combining to hedge her round, while the poor outsider who sins ever so little, finds her iniquities shrieked to the four winds of heaven.

“What luck these daughters of notorious

women have," said Lala languidly. "They carry off all the big matches! You see the mothers can give them such introductions." She turned to bestow her sweetest smile on a painted old wretch, whose iniquities had, from mere force of time and habit, become an institution, and therefore most highly respected.

Billy went on his way with some of the curl taken out of his moustache, and an air of dejection about his usually pert and lively eyeglass. He was sorry for the poor woman who had just been cut, as men always are sorry for the Magdalenes of the world (being indeed responsible for their own work)—but Lala's laws were as those of the Medes and Persians, and altered not. And if the world loves a whipping-boy, it also hates the neighbour who parades in public those secret sins that both have in common, and it abhors giving a "name" to what everybody knows, and everybody

chooses to ignore, till it is brutally forced upon them.

In his divagations he knocked up against Basil, and promptly hooked on to him, but Basil, resenting this uneven distribution of weight, deposited his incubus in one chair and himself in another, whence they watched the sparse stream of people trickling to and fro.

"There she is!" Bill presently exclaimed, and hopped up with amazing alacrity.

"How are you, Hawkhurst?" said Jem, glad to meet a neighbour, but with a disgusted feeling that men sprang up in battalions when Easter was anywhere around, though he could walk the whole length of the Park without ever being accosted, when he appeared alone.

When an introduction had been effected, Basil, who always made his inclinations give way to his manners (except perhaps when he was in the country), joined the group. His

dark face was austere in the cold sunshine, but now that she was released from the prison she had just now shared with him, Easter's heart leaped for joy as he looked at her.

"Are you still—*wretched*?" he said, under cover of Bill's conversation with Jem.

Their eyes met. Unappeasable, unappeased, something looked out of his, and her colour faded.

"Mrs. Burghersh," cut in Bill's voice, "I want you both to dine with me at the Amphitryon to-night, and do a play after. Strokoff, will you come too?"

"We have an engagement for to-night," she said; whereupon Jem squeezed her arm so joyfully, that everybody thought she was telling a lie—though in point of fact, she was not, being pledged to some of Jem's people, who were of the dullest, as the greatest, of the earth.

"Jem," said Easter, when they got back to

Long's and she had mounted a chair to put both hands on her husband's shoulders, and look into his eyes, "don't you think that town with its Savoy, and Amphitryon, and Berkeley, its Park, and Sandown, and Tattersall's, its Bond Street, and Opera, is just a circus ring where you are bound to pass, and repass the same people a hundred times a day, to show off your paces, however much you may wish to avoid them?"

Jem looked earnestly at his wife, as he squeezed her face up together, so as to kiss as much as possible of it at once.

"I loathe it all," he said. "Let's go home, Easter," he added, as her face sank out of sight on his shoulder.

"Yes, that would be best, to run far away out of the reach of temptation, and stop there for ever and ever," she said to herself, and then she thought of Nan, who was coming up immediately — unwillingly yielded by Mr. Denison, to whom much humble pie had

lately been eaten by the Burghershs'. "We can't put off Nan," she said, jumping down as her maid knocked at the door, and reminded her it was time to dress for dinner.

Jem's face fell.

"She wouldn't mind," he said.

But already Easter's mood had changed. She remembered Lala's advice—and Town was for a day, and the Hangingshaw for all time—and the frock she was just going to put on, delicious.

"Jem," she said, "to-morrow you shall go and see Hugon—it will be a pious deed, and make you feel better."

"And afterwards, if you don't mind," said Jem with vigour, "I'll kick some of your admirers to please myself."

"Do," said Easter, as she vanished.

CHAPTER IV.

“Those who have lamps will pass them to others.”

—PLATO.

THE acquaintance with Lala Hoyos grew apace, since, as Basil was quite determined to see Easter in one place, if he could not in another, it became Lala's chief business to bring them together, whereupon all her friends said “How clever!” and so effectually did she preach the gospel of to-day, which is, that you should never take your husband about with you, but always some other woman's property, if you want to enjoy yourself, that Jem found himself constantly gravitating to Fairmile, where he could talk of Easter to his heart's content—which was the next best thing to absorbing her company.

“They seem to be always talking clothes,”

he said, ruefully, one day to Hugon, scarcely realizing how such merchandise has hustled many a man out of a woman's heart—possibly because they take so much more room than he does. On the other hand, many a man loves a woman as interpreted by her clothes solely—it is only your savage lover who pierces through an habiliment of dishclouts to the indestructible She, and finds her beautiful.

Jem was emphatically out of it, and he was not sorry. An artificial life for him had no joys, and many a man does not know how nature, all unconsciously, has filled his heart, till he finds himself in a great city, and the clocks do not tell him the hours, or the almanac the days, so well as from sheer habit will occur the thought, “The white violets will be out on the west bank, with the hedge behind it,” or “The cuckoo will be calling from heaven to her namesake in the marshy meadow below,” and even a whiff

from a florist's will bring up before him his favourites of the copse and hedgerow, so that waking in the muffled dawn of a great city, he will see it glorious on his own country side, or when rain has fallen, in fancy wander in his own garden, and smell earth and leaf sweeter than any costliest town exotic.

Thus Jem found pleasure in Fairmile which was still rural, though less than a dozen miles out of town, and as he talked of Easter, evidently thought that the almond trees were blossoming at the mere recollection of her.

It happened on one of these half-holiday excursions in the neighbourhood, that they passed a gate which gave a brief glimpse of a big white house, one side of which seemed to consist entirely of a glass winter-garden, and with sudden interest, Jem asked whose it was.

“It belongs to old Prince Strokoff, Basil's father.”

Jem had not known till now that Basil's

people lived at Fairmile, and it set him thinking, and he did not like his thoughts. Yet after a moment's pause he spoke of something else, and did not when he went home, or at any other time, reproach Easter with having preserved a silence towards him, that amounted surely to deceit.

A woman, metaphorically speaking, keeps a hand-glass beside her, into which, when she has done something noble, she looks for applause, and finds it. Man has no such glass handy, and when he does a magnanimous thing, not only never dreams of self-congratulation, but absolutely does not realise that he has done anything out of the common way; probably thinks he has rather made a fool of himself than otherwise. The woman has reaped her reward, for if nobody else knows, *she* knows, and has richly enjoyed patting herself on the back, while the man blunders on, cheerless, uncomforted, with no outward or inward sign of victory.

Some time afterwards, when they had turned homewards, Jem said, as if they were continuing a conversation, "You see, Hugon, she liked *me* best."

"Of course," said Hugon, thinking of how most of us at least once in our lives say, "No," in our pride, to what we most passionately desire.

She pushed her shabby hat back from her brow.

"Jem," she said, "have you ever felt when you have gone out angry, and a gentle west wind has caressed your face, that your face was not good enough for it? That's what I feel when I come out here, and talk to you."

"Dear little woman," said Jem, "how I wish we could make things better for you in every way."

"You've no need to wish that," she said. "You've always done it. And to make a bright spot in anyone's life—to add a little to

the heap of happiness, not the misery, in this world, is a great thing. If it be only to show a kind face—to say a gentle word, so that loving thoughts and looks may follow you—though you be none the wiser. But they never mingle, Jem,” she added, a little wildly, “the happy and the unhappy lives! They are like the poplar trees at Penroses, which, however blown about, make room for each other, and in wildest storm, never touch!”

“Poor soul,” said Jem, gently, and was it not the feminine touch in his character that made his charm to her? For a man must have a touch of weakness in him to be really manly, and prevent his strength from overriding, and crushing a woman’s tender heart.

“Every hour is lost that is not spent in love,” said Vanini, and he spoke wisely, knowing so well that both the love and the hour are short. And now Hugon began to talk about Easter, that Jem might tarry a little longer beside her.

“We’ve got to dance at a ball to-night,” responded Jem, “at least *she* has. I stand behind a door, and hold her bouquet—one of those beastly shower things that make you look a fool—but she does enjoy it so, dear little woman!” he added heartily.

“And does Basil Strokoff—dance?”

“I don’t know what he doesn’t do. Easter and Mrs. Hoyos are on his coach to-day somewhere, I suppose I’m a fool to let her go, but it’s her first fling in town, and I haven’t the heart to dock her pleasures, and that’s a fact. There’ll be trouble enough when we get home, for I hear Denison has been losing heavily—with both hands—and he won’t pull up, or face things, or do anything. Easter only knows a very little, and I hope Nan won’t tell her.”

“When is Nan coming?”

“To-morrow. We have been waiting for her. She seems to be Denison’s favourite child now.”

They had arrived at the school gates, and behind the wire blind a lot of girls' heads were bobbing, and an india-rubber figure was made to execute a low bow, as if in derision of the handsome young married man, and the faded governess, who so regularly walked out together.

Only, when Jem had said good-bye, her face haunted him by its likeness to some one he had seen before—the resemblance had worried him when she stood under the pink almond blossom—looking up at it with tired blue eyes—but now he was able to place her. She was like one of Burne Jones's women, and he had always felt so sorry for those women; they seemed to have planned their lives so extremely ill, and they always looked so hungry, and so awkward to make love to, and then, after the fashion of selfish male nature, he thought of Easter. A man seldom remembers anything he does not want—and he always wanted Easter.

CHAPTER V.

“Princes are never without flatterers to seduce them, ambition to deprave them, and desires to corrupt them.”

—PLATO.

NAN sat bolt upright on the extreme edge of one of Lala's green and yellow chairs, feeling acutely wretched, when up to a few moments ago she had been utterly and intensely happy, for she had been almost overpowered by the variety of delightful emotions through which she had passed during the brief hours since her arrival in town. Everything, even the hammering of the great pulse of life that throbbed through Bond Street, the enthralling interest of the first play (a full-blooded melodrama) that she had ever beheld, those wonderful shops out of which that morning she had issued, a new and gorgeous Nan, and

most delightful of all, the meeting with Basil had so enchanted her, that when subsequently brought by Easter to tea with Lala Hoyos, she had just drawn a deep breath of satisfaction at her exquisite surroundings, then sat down with folded hands to be quiet, and enjoy everything, and now—what was it? A false note had been struck—in every nerve of her sensitive body she felt it, and was jarred all over and made miserable. Was it possible that through all the outward purity, Lala's inner life revealed itself to senses almost as acute and delicate as those of some fleet-footed forest thing, who is aware of the snarer's approach long before it is possible to distinguish his lightest tread?

One of the cherubs was present, and Nan observed incidentally that it got no kisses, if plenty of cake, and this, though Penroses suffered from an overplus of cherubs (mostly naughty) disquieted the girl, though it certainly had not the effect of making her

heart sink in the plummet-like way it was now doing.

She had been so overjoyed to see Basil again, so enraptured to behold Easter in all her richly-set loveliness, and now that she saw the two talking together like intimate friends in the window embrasure yonder, why was she not glad, instead of being seized with the conviction that everything had become hopelessly *wrong*, and that it could never come right again any more?

Lala came over to the little figure that looked forlorn in spite of all its bravery, being attracted as others were by the little ugly face whose freckles showed so plainly through the pale skin, yet was all illumined with something that made even beauty seem commonplace beside it. But as usual, Nan had kicked over the traces, and spoiled all Easter's care by tying up her glorious masses of hair with a scarlet ribbon that she was never allowed to wear at home,

nor would be wearing now, if Dinkie, that stern censor of her clothes and manners, happened to be anywhere around.

Nan looked up earnestly at Easter's new friend, and in a way that made Lala uncomfortable.

She had an odd sense of being stripped of her outward presentment, and her inner self suddenly laid bare to this child to whom had not yet come the extinction of that "single eye which makes the whole body full of light," and that, call it interpenetration, comprehension, simplicity, what you will, had in Nan so strangely survived childhood, and like a search light roved hither and thither over the hearts and minds brought in contact with her own, often to their great confusion, and her own keen disappointment and sorrow.

"Where's Jem?" said Nan gravely, looking across anxiously at Basil and Easter, "doesn't he bring Easter out to tea?"

“Sometimes.”

“Then he ought to always,” said Nan intrepidly. “I think it’s about time we went home,” she added, and got up, and approached the pair in the window, who started guiltily apart as she drew near.

“What are you two talking about?” said Nan, looking from one to the other, steadily.

“Oh, nothing,” said Easter, greatly taken aback, and catching at her breath in a hurry, but Basil’s face darkened. Nan was his better angel who had been welcome to him at Penroses, but he did not want her now, and with all his heart he wished her at that moment back in her dusty old cellar taking counsel with her own soul.

It is impossible to over-estimate the danger when two persons of opposite sexes, hitherto irreconcilable, begin to soften to each other, to find excuses for one another, to discover virtues that no one else ever discovered, and in a word to become friends. The surrender

is all the more entire in proportion to the fierceness of their former alienation, and they behold each other, not as they really are, but arrayed in all the spendthrift generosity of their thoughts.

“I think you are very unkind to me, Nan,” said Basil, not without effort. There was a little flush on his dark face, a dangerous, reckless look in his eyes, not so quickly got rid of as had been the signs on Easter’s.

Nan looked at him eagerly, lovingly—as so many women and children did at Basil, then she shook her head. Those clear eyes, those unworn instincts of hers, never played her false, and she knew now why everything had all at once become so “wrong” to her, and frightened her.

“You were good at Penroses, Basil, but somehow I don’t know how it is, you’re not half so good now, though you are such a swell, and look so grand,” she said sadly.

“Your hat is all on one side, child,” said

Easter crossly, "and you have spoiled yourself with that hideous red ribbon. You must have tied it on when my back was turned," which was the fact.

Nan's eternal vanity stirred. She consulted a Venetian mirror near, and put her hat on straight, but she did not take off the ribbon. Then she looked at Easter's white cloth gown edged with beaver and bonnet to match, and sighed—happy for a moment in the joy that her sister's beauty gave her, but the shadow came back immediately, and she pulled at Easter's hand to draw her away.

"Let's go home," she said, "to Jem."

Easter pushed the child's hand away, and turned to the window, feeling herself plucked suddenly out of that sweet intoxication in which she had lately been plunged, that delicious draught of a country-bred girl's first season, to which she brings everything brisk and fresh, even to the young blood with

which to enjoy it—ay, and a heart as young as her years.

All this, and more, had been Easter's; and now Nan was doing her best to spoil it all . . . she looked back into the room just as Basil, who had turned abruptly away, was moving with Lala towards the inner room, and something familiar as from long practice in the way the pair moved together, so completely in accordance, so exquisitely matched, struck disagreeably on Easter, preoccupied as she was . . . a film seemed to clear from her eyes, and she saw—what was it that she saw?—that had oppressed Nan from the first?

It was significant of the drowsy moral atmosphere in which she had been dwelling, that Easter had not lately speculated on what were the terms existing between Lala Hoyos and Prince Strokoff. He was constantly in Park Lane, to be sure, but Mr. Hoyos, who often appeared at his own dinner table, and was even occasionally to be met on his own

stairs, appeared on the best of terms with Basil, and the servants and children treated him as one of the family.

“I had no idea Prince Strokoff was such a personage,” she had said one day to Lala, trying to adjust her ideas of Basil here, and Basil at Penroses, and Lala had looked straight at Easter with those grey-green eyes of hers, and replied :

“He is one of the very best men in Town, or you would not see him in my house.”

But then so many other “best” men came here too, and why? Lala’s corrupt influence that consisted mainly in relaxing the moral fibre of her friends without their becoming aware of it, suddenly revealed itself as something horrible, unclean, to Easter . . . it was as though she saw with Nan’s eyes, Nan’s eyes that had frightened Basil away, silencing his tongue, and sending him to Lala. . . .

He and she were probably sitting at that moment on the tiger-covered *estrade*, that

Easter had always instinctively avoided ; they had sat there long before he had ever seen herself, they would be there side by side long after she, a mere episode, had gone back to the obscurity whence she had temporarily emerged, they were old sweethearts, old pals, while *she* Easter snatched Nan's thin arm and hurried her across the room, down the stairs, past the men-servants in the hall, and out of the door, never stopping till they had passed through a little *grille* into the Park, where she paused panting, to find herself face to face with—Jem.

“How on earth do you come *here*?” cried Easter, catching her breath unevenly.

“Well,” said Jem, looking rather shamefaced, “wherever you are, I’m never far off—and you’re nearly always with Mrs. Hoyos at this time—you might want me for something or other, you know, and I like to see you drive past, and everybody admiring you,” he added, squeezing her arm with his usual

indecent regard for public opinion. "I say to myself, 'That's my Missus,' and I long to tell everybody I meet, and feel I shall burst if I don't."

"You are a silly old person," said Easter, still pale and disordered, but Nan, once out of Lala Hoyos' atmosphere, and now in the right one, had recovered herself, and with hat askew, and one of her stockings worming down, walked on air.

"Jem," she said, "you've got better flowers here than we have in the country, and Dinkie never told me one word about them!"

"O! this is all very well," said Jem disparagingly, "but give *me* the wild flowers. Why, I've stood in those woods below the Shaw and I've seen—yes, I've *seen* the hyacinths creep up over the green, bit by bit, till the bloom has almost covered my feet, like a little stealing wave of the sea, only ever so much sweeter, you know; and they grow of their own accord, and just how they

please, not like these stiff, stuck-up town sisters of theirs that take an army of gardeners to plant and keep up to the mark ! ”

“ Jem,” said Easter, “ you may take me home to your beloved Shaw to-morrow if you like.”

Jem looked transported with joy, then glanced down at Nan, whose senses were all scattered in enjoyment, and shook his head.

“ We can’t spoil the poor little soul’s pleasure like that,” he whispered, “ we must give her a few days longer, and then——”

“ Jem,” said Easter severely, “ if you persist in making love to me out of doors, I’ll get a divorce. People will never suspect me of being your wife, or even if I were—a man in America was imprisoned the other day for kissing his wife in the street ! It was such a strange wish on his part, you know, and he was properly punished.”

“ Don’t get into that cynical way of

talking, dear," said Jem in a hurt tone, "it may be Mrs. Hoyos' style, but it isn't yours. You are too young, and it doesn't suit you a bit—here she is."

It was indeed Lala who came by just then, dressed in Lenten colours of course, sitting upright as a lance, and returning those salutations, nearly all respectful and admiring, so frequently made to her, for at the bottom of human nature is a very real and enduring love of wicked people, we take a fearful joy as we stand on the right side of the hedge—almost within touch of the culprit, but safe—and some, even the best of us, love to be wicked vicariously. So that when we see a brilliant sinner committing the sins that we have all the wish, but not the courage, to commit for ourselves, and when moreover by some marvellous sleight-of-hand trick we see that person escaping all the consequences of his or her wrongdoing, we applaud and admire the successful free lance, and what is

more Mrs. Grundy thoroughly enters into the joke, and applauds her too.

So that a glance of recognition from Lala's grey eyes was coveted by women as much as men, and having reduced the enjoyment of life to a science while she was yet young, and knowing that no pleasures, or worldly consideration went the way of a virtuous woman, she had an exceedingly good time of it all round, and would never be able in the future to reproach herself—that bitterest regret of a bad woman—with having missed a single opportunity of doing what seemed most good in her own eyes. And above all things, she keenly enjoyed the excitement of successfully balancing herself on the social tight-rope, indeed, without that exercise of skill, she could not have really enjoyed herself at all.

At the present moment, seeing, without seeming to see, the husband, the wife, the little sister, standing together in one of the side walks, like any happy, honest *bourgeois*

family who knew no better in their enjoyments, she smiled as she turned her small, *soignée* head, away, for things went well.

And she had done all that Basil could possibly expect of her, and if Nan's eyes had given *her* a scare, they had scared that drifting idiot, Easter, too, who would presently go home to the Hangingshaw, while Basil—Basil would remain.



CHAPTER VI.

“Surveying all things with a quiet scorn,
Tamed himself down to living purposes,
The occupations and the semblances
Of ordinary men—and such he seemed.”

THE opera was over, and the *foyer* was crowded with the usual polyglot crowd brought together by music, the one thing that annihilates time and space, and sweeps away as if they were not, the false conditions of life, influencing the young, the good, the bad, the rich and the poor equally, if for the better, or the worse, who shall say?

It is something to have one's soul filled with rapture, to lose one's own personality even, in a heavenly strain, but does it morally sustain us, does it toughen our mental fibre, strengthen our principles, increase our spirituality, or help us to better wage the

daily war most of us fight between our duty and our inclinations?

I trow not. Music is a seduction, a luxury, an enervation of the senses that sets us dreaming, maybe weeping, when we should work, longing where only the stern duty of renunciation lies before us, remembering when only stern forgetting can save us, and under its influence, passionate souls, rendered by it more passionate, have been moved to words and actions that they have looked back upon afterwards as the irresponsible promptings of madness—or the Devil.

Nan and Easter were together, and Jem had gone to look for his umbrella. It was one of those ineffaceable signs in him, by which you may know the man who is not, nor ever will be, a man of fashion, that wet or fine (though in the country he never saw one), in town he was never seen without an umbrella.

I believe it was forcibly abducted from him

at the *levée*, but it is certain that his habit of taking it to balls and the opera was extremely inconvenient, and to-night was the cause of Easter missing her turn when their carriage came up.

Perhaps her shouted name advertised her, but a great many people turned to look at the lovely young woman in her black robe, heavily encrusted about the breast with rubies of great size and splendour, and at the little red-headed girl with the earnest face who stood beside her—and among others was Lala Hoyos, who at once made her graceful way to where they stood.

“How are you, dear?” she said easily, and certainly Lala’s way of address was charming—the worse a woman is, the more impeccable her manners invariably are. She was wrapped in a grey poplin cloak that fitted her like a sheath, and swathed in cobwebby laces almost to her lips, while the tall, slender form, and foot, and hand, all

went to make up an identity unapproachable in its distinction and charm.

“I am very well,” said Easter gravely.

“I have called to see you,” said Mrs. Hoyos, airily, “until I got ashamed of asking if you were in—but of course you have been taking your little sister about. Don’t you see Prince Strokoff?”

Easter lifted an Egyptian fan of black feathers to the level of her chin as Basil bowed before her. She carried herself so royally that she seemed almost as tall as he, and their eyes met in a sudden flash, but hers flashed first. His gaze swooped down on her mouth which she had scorned to hide—clung there—perchance forced those rosy curves asunder, for she said,

“How well Miss Eames sang to-night! But I like Calvé better.”

“I thought you had gone home,” he said. “Have you given orders at Long’s that you are never once at home during

the whole twenty-four hours of each day and night?"

"How can you spare time from your—duties"—Easter glanced over her shoulder at Lala Hoyos—"to call on me?"

Basil smiled. She had exposed a nerve, and nerves are healthily alive — especially jealous ones, it is only when you cease to have the power of hurting a thing, that it has passed out of your province, and your life.

"You are looking more lovely than ever to-night," he murmured, and indeed though it is difficult to make a sensation in a crowd, the people near steadily encroached upon her, and discussed her to her face.

"We are going away almost immediately," said Easter with perfect calm. "We are anxious about father."

"Yes," said Basil, looking down, and in quite altered tones, "I have heard about it from Hawkhurst—and I wish I could do

something — you know how I like Mr. Denison. If I could be of any service——”

That was the worst or the best of Basil, that when one was most angry with him, out would come some genuine trait of goodness, that endeared him to you whether you would or no.

“Thank you,” she said gently, unconsciously reminding him of what a brute he had been to her once, of how bitterly he had made her weep . . . and had he not been crueller to her since that, for even now was he not the hunter, she the prey?

His face changed, and a more manly, tender feeling for her than he had hitherto known, touched him then. He made a sudden resolve that he would not go to Fitzwalters for the recess.

“Doesn’t she look like Benson’s shop-window?” said Lala’s voice between them, as by a glance she indicated a woman in yellow velvet whose ample bust was one

vast *parterre* of diamonds, "and how very little trouble her bodices must be to fit—most of her is outside them!"

Jem appeared at this moment brandishing his rescued gamp, and it crossed Easter's mind vexedly, that she could not really be a woman of taste, or she never would have married a man who went through life as the Siamese twin to an umbrella.

"He wanted to put me off with another fellow's," said Jem wrathfully, and shewing signs in his countenance of a recent fray, "I've a jolly good mind to report him," and full of his grievance, and without seeing Basil, he tucked Easter's hand under his arm, and hurried her away.

Jem indeed had almost forgotten that gentleman, not having seen him for nearly a week. Easter had not fretted after him, or even mentioned him, and a man almost always looks at essentials, and eschews problems. I don't know anything that so en-

courages deceit in women as the fact that the average man does not see what is not painted in one of the primary colors right under his nose. Man is not imaginative—except when he is ill—then he knows he is going to die, and usually does—from pure fright.

So that when Jem had put that lovely young harmony in black and rose into the carriage which just now came up for the second time, and turning round to look for Nan, found her under Basil's protection, he met the Russian cordially enough, and then, the coachman being vociferously ordered to move on, pushed Nan in, and quickly followed her. But Basil coolly held up his hand, then standing bare-headed by the carriage door, said :

“You will allow me to call and wish you good-bye to-morrow about three?”

Easter's reply was inaudible, he waited a long moment, then gave the signal to move

on, and the hollow echo of the horses' feet beneath the archway seemed to strike in thunder on her heart.

And Nan that night sobbed herself to sleep. Basil had scarcely spoken to her, scarcely even seen her, though she stood beside him, but only Easter, and she had watched their faces as they talked together, and they had frightened her. . . .

And Easter also was weeping while Jem slept—weeping as a child weeps, out of whose hand is snatched the cake, but half eaten, or one who, hearkening eagerly, is left with the tale half told, of which she most passionately desires to know the end.

Basil found other means than tears to distract his thoughts. But when in broad daylight he closed his eyes, most unaccountably his mind remained in the same state as it had been some hours before. He would *not* go to Fitzwalters for the recess.

CHAPTER VII.

“Common souls pay with what they do ; nobler souls with that which they are.”

THERE had been one touch of peculiarity about Easter that might be regarded variously as folly or wisdom by different persons, she had absolutely refused to attend either of the March drawing-rooms.

Even the temptation of wearing an exquisite gown, and probably being the most beautiful person there, would not move her, and though she had every right to go to court, as Jem's people were among the great ones of the earth (though quite obscure, inasmuch as they had always behaved themselves), and they thought Easter's objections ridiculous, yet there was a strong touch of originality in this young woman, who, when other people hooped and

barrelled themselves, wore stripes. She told Jem that when Mrs. Snooks, and Mrs. Push, and Mrs. Doubtful gave up sticking plumes on their heads, and tails on their backs, and asking permission to pay a morning call at a place they were never likely to set foot in again, she would be delighted to go to Court—and not before. She supposed the fun came in when they had their photographs taken, and had suburban friends in to bare-backed tea.

Meanwhile Jem's people, who were very good and very dull—else Easter had not found the society of Lala so entertaining—saw that the right people called on Jem's wife, and that she was invited to those Lenten festivities, to which people went mourning in lavender for souls that, for the most part, had never existed.

There is a story told of Byron that being taxed with staring unmercifully at a lady, he was asked if he had never seen a beautiful woman before, to which he replied :

“A great many, but never one who wore her hair outside her bonnet instead of inside.”

Now Easter did not startle people by any such eccentricity, but in Town as in the country she dazzled all beholders by her delicious colouring, and at first her successes had amused her, till latterly these well-groomed men, who looking hard in her eyes for what they did not find, walked sharp off in the opposite direction, ended by disgusting and angering her.

Often, indeed, she felt ashamed of being a woman, and almost hated the complexion which gave her the aspect of a new edition of an old classic, and nowhere at any time met any two men to match Basil and Jem. And indeed one could not wish a woman a worse fate than to be loved by two such men at one and the same time, for, alas! it might end in her loving both.

And now Nan had been taken to all the

solemn regulation shows; the Tower, the Monument (up which she had walked two double lest her weight should o'ertopple it), St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Madame Tussaud's, and everything else that can purge a young provincial of her ignorance, and shew her life. But Nan greatly missed Dinkie, the sole arbiter usually of her pleasures and sorrows, and often she felt it was too much for one inconsiderable person to enjoy by herself, and that Dinkie's taking half would have doubled her joys.

Sometimes, when it was not too late for conversation after a play, she would unbosom herself of some of that perilous stuff which weighed upon her mind, and overflow to Jem and Easter, who had lately reverted to that 'Arry and 'Arriett style which Lala had for a time so effectually knocked on the head. In her code of manners, to show the smallest affection for a husband, was in the most execrable taste, while a *tendresse*, even for

a favoured lover, should be no more than suspected.

“What frightens me most,” said Nan, on their last night but one in Town, “is how one is nothing—how little mark one can make on anything, and how you never find it out till you come to a big city, and see all the millions of people going to and fro in it! I’ll never get into a rage again, and think it matters, or that *I’m* anything, for every house, every place, every street you go into is different, and all the people are different, and they are all living their own lives as hard and as well as they can, and they don’t know or care anything about *us*, and we don’t care about *them*, and nothing matters much to anybody except just his very own self, and to do his duty to what’s nearest.”

Nan paused awhile, and the multitudinous roar of the street seemed to echo her words.

“I’d like to be rich,” she went on wistfully.

“It’s the only thing that makes one want money—to help people, to take sunshine in, and drive hunger and cold out. Only think, to have gold in your pocket, and to know that little children were starving, and their mothers’ hearts breaking, and not to go and give it to them! Oh, you see it in their faces—not the beggars, but those who don’t beg — it’s the silent ones I’m sorry for. Sometimes when you let me get out of the carriage in the Park, people come and sit down quite near, and they don’t say a word, but they have got famine and despair in their eyes—and—you know you’re so good to me, Jem, about pocket-money, I always give them something, and sometimes they are too far gone even to say ‘Thank you,’ but they shuffle away towards the shops—not to the river.”

“But you only stop their hunger for a little while, Nan,” said Easter. “The trifle you give them cannot last for ever.”

“But it helps,” urged Nan. “Perhaps something else turned up after that. And if I help them a little, why shouldn’t someone else help them more?”

“Something usually does turn up,” admitted Easter, apparently following some train of thought of her own, “life would be unendurable but for details. You rage, weep, vow that your life is over, then luncheon or dinner time comes, and you abuse the cook roundly if the fish is over or under-done, or you praise the wine, and so comes consolation. It’s humiliating that the worst sorrow on earth loses half its strength if you can pour into the body that holds the suffering soul a pint of strong soup or a glass of old wine—but that’s the truth.”

Nan looked in a puzzled way at Easter, but Jem went on puffing at his cigar, for he was getting to understand Easter and her moods better than anyone else had ever done—understood her to an extent that it might have

startled her perhaps to know. Have we not all met some woman who has for her husband a man dogged, faithful, devoted, ever ready to save her from the consequences of her own follies, even to forgive and comfort her when, perchance, all the world has turned against her?

And perhaps Jem knew what was in Easter's thoughts during those last few days before leaving town almost as well as she knew herself. The feverish unrest, the constant movement, the utter inability to sit still all pointed to a state of mind the reverse of happy, and not without some painful searchings of the soul had Jem hit upon the real reason, and ignored it.

Basil had called, and she had been really out. He had called again, and she had been in, but excused herself. She had left cards on Lala Hoyos, and met that lady abroad once or twice, and in the distance—conspicuous even among those magnificently-

grown men and women only to be seen in Bond Street during the season — she had caught sight of Basil, but managed to avoid him.

And meanwhile her temper suffered ; so did Jem.

“Nan, child,” she said impatiently, “be off to bed. You and Jem are going to see Hugon to-morrow, and we go home next day.”

Nan looked wistfully at Easter out of her fleece of red hair.

“I haven’t vexed you, Essie, have I ?” she said humbly.

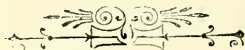
“No, no, child,” but a queer expression crossed Easter’s face. Who but Nan had come between that friendship which had held such perilous excitement and charm for her, and which she now so passionately and achingly missed ?

“God bless you, Easter !” said the child as she went away.

“God bless you, Nan !” said her sister, then

remembered how, with much the same words, she had once parted with Basil — Basil plagued with a sudden fit of repentance. And he had gone straight from her to Lala Hoyos—and no matter who came between, it would be Lala Hoyos to the end.

“Jem,” she said, and leaned her head against his arm, “it’s very good of you to care for a wretch like me. And perhaps if you keep on hard at it, I’ll care too for a good man like you—some day.”



CHAPTER VIII.

“God is ever drawing like towards like, and making them acquainted.”

—PLATO’S “LYSIS.”

“EASTER couldn’t come,” explained Nan bravely—bravely because something seemed to catch in her throat, as Hugon looked past her with a face literally *sick* with pain and hunger, and then Jem came in, and pity died, for Hugon, radiant with joy, had gone to meet him.

There is a spiritual beauty, the beauty of renunciation, of suffering, of a struggle through pain to a higher life beyond, that will shine through commonest clay and glorify it until as one of our greatest modern painters long ago discovered, often it happens that such spiritual grace becomes the only form of loveliness that satisfies our eyes,

making of no account the mere splendour of bodily perfection.

The bare room, the dismal patch of garden beyond, the pale woman in her shabby black gown, that glorious light upon her face. . . . Nan grasped it all, tried to understand it, stumbled on the brink of a discovery, then, as Hugon turned to speak to her, saw the light go out—saw that it was only the poor governess who spoke, and answered her at random.

Where had it gone—what had brought it there? That serene look of absolute joy, contentment and . . . love? It came suddenly back as Jem spoke to her—even as when the sun strikes a folded flower, and lo! its petals fall open like the leaves of a much-loved book at the touch of its owner's hand, and all its beauty is made known.

Nan felt her head going round. A vague sense of the inconvenience of seeing things that nobody else saw, and that she was

clearly not intended to see, came to her then, things that gave her too so much more pain than pleasure. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*, only the comprehension must come first; the forgiveness is a long way off to these young clear-eyed judges whose gaze will have to be blurred by bitter weeping before the true proportion of mercy is made known to them.

“We expect you down at the Shaw for the Easter holidays,” Jem was saying, “mind that!”

Hugon shook her head.

“It is quite impossible,” she said.

“That’s nonsense,” said Jem, who indeed observed none of those changes in Hugon that Nan did. Indeed, it is his total incapacity to see anything he is not actively looking for, that makes man the robust, successful, one-idea’d animal he is. “I shall just fish out the old ladies and ask them.”

Nan looked timidly at Hugon when left

alone with her, feeling which she had not been “good,” yet not knowing how to do anything but pity her. And Hugon looked kindly at this child whom she had always liked, and in a measure understood. Both had a grand capacity for despair, only with this difference, that Nan hoped too much, and learned nothing from constantly being disappointed, the other hoped for nothing, and had got used to it. Moreover, Hugon possessed that sort of sympathy for others which springs from a thorough knowledge of good and evil, mingled with the pity of a master mind for the weakness and faults of others, while Nan’s intuitive comprehension of others had its root in that universal love which loves its fellow-men because it cannot help loving them.

Almost immediately Jem returned, disappointed. The old ladies did not know, in fact they were not sure if they would give any Easter holidays this year, and, he added, that they had been—prim.

They presently escaped to the garden, concerning which Easter had given Nan more than one lively sketch. In her investigations, she lost Jem and Hugon, but coming suddenly upon them, it struck her that they looked happy, and suited one another, which was the instantaneous impression (and Nan's mind was a whole gallery of vivid impressions) that they conveyed to her . . . and immediately following it, Memory also flashed back a recent photograph of Basil and Easter standing in a bow window in Park Lane, and they too had appeared perfectly happy. Was happiness a question of suitability, after all—not love, but *suitability*? Jem was not a beauty, he was only big and strong, and Hugon was only Hugon, with her own strange charm. Jem could not wear a coat, or bear himself at all times and seasons like a king, as Easter looked a queen—*therefore*—but Nan got no further, and stopped short—confused.

Just then she saw the old ladies hovering inside a distant window, and felt a desire to make their acquaintance. Nan had a great reverence for old people, who, on their part, were never hard upon her sins, so she ventured to approach them, and spent a happy hour with them in a real old-fashioned atmosphere that made her feel for once, quite happy and good. Only latterly was a wrong chord struck ; it was when the gentle gaze, wise from long experience, of Miss Harriett fell on the pair lingering in the garden.

“ Your sister and Mr. Burghersh are very much attached, I believe ? ”

Nan agreed.

“ But she never comes with him, though he is here so often,” said Miss Betsy, “ and in my young days, husbands and wives always went about together.”

“ Yes, ma’am,” said Nan respectfully.

They were very innocent, very much behind the times, these dear old ladies who,

taking the girls to town for a treat, a decade or so before Easter's time, had landed them all at Cremorne Gardens, where innocently and intelligently, the whole party had enjoyed itself down to the ground and taken no harm. To the pure—we know the rest; and the old ladies never found out that Cremorne was not a beautiful public garden specially arranged for the improvement and enjoyment of high class ladies' schools.

“You are not a bit like Easter,” said Miss Betsy, with something wistful in her look as she put the child's curly, rich hair back from her wide brow.

“No, ma'am, I'm afraid you'd have found me a lot of trouble. I'm nearly always naughty, and then I'm—sorry.”

They both kissed her as if in despite of her wickedness, though their looks were cold enough when Jem and Hugon came in. As the moment of parting grew near, Hugon's

face became like a transparent mask behind which the light was being slowly extinguished inch by inch . . . before it was quite out, Nan without a word put up her face, and in farewell, kissed her.

“Now don’t forget,” said Jem cheerily, as he wrung her hand, “that we expect you down for the holidays at the Shaw.”

He looked round at the old ladies defiantly, whose “primness” he warmly resented, but Hugon’s lips only moved—her face was wan as the dead.

When the door had closed upon the child and man, she groped her way upstairs like one blind, and the old ladies heard her door shut, and the key turn.

“Sister,” said Miss Betsy, “I wish we had had a reference with Mademoiselle Hugon. She came to us with nothing—not even a Christian name on her linen—nothing; but a faultless French accent—still she did very well till she went to Penroses. She came back changed.

She is half dead except when Mr. Burghersh comes here, and then she is alive—and beautiful. And that giddy young wife does not see. I will have nothing to do with sending Made-moiselle again to Penroses—and to-night I shall tell her so.”

They were not hard old ladies, they were only intensely narrow-minded, and when Hugon heard Miss Betsy, she knew that they were actually giving her the opportunity of saving her soul alive—only when the stake is one’s very last chance of human happiness, often the soul—loses.



CHAPTER IX.

“To endure misfortune is greater than to die.”

—CÆSAR.

JEM had arranged to drop Nan at Penroses, then drive Easter home afterwards, but there was a curious quietude and absence of welcome about the place when they arrived, and the girls' hearts sank, as entering the house from the stables, they knocked at the Green-room door, and went in.

Tom was sitting over a fire—a fire, when without doors spring was coming up with a rush, and the room smelled of doctor's stuff, brandy, and had that peculiar airlessness which to the atmosphere of a house is what the dry-rot is to a man's soul—for there must be movement, there must be air in a dwelling-place for health of body, and when the breath of hope ceases to play through the

chambers of the spirit, a man is no better at life's feast than the deaf one who sits down to enjoy at his leisure a meadow-scape full of light and shadow, the whole meaning of which he misses, because he cannot *hear* the million sounds that give life and meaning to the picture. There it all lies, but it is so still . . . no sound of bird voices (so much more akin to God than any human ones), no rustle of leaf or grain, no multitudinous hum of insect, or murmur of field and forest creeping thing; they are all there, but he hears them not, and though he sees what is spread out before him, he does not *feel* it in all its glorious completeness, any more than the earth could be aught but void without the spirit of God moved, now as air, now as the mighty wind, ever upon its face, and the face of its waters.

“Father!” cried Easter, with a sob in her throat, marvelling that she could ever have found the courage, ay, and the ingratitude to

run away from this broken man who with two patches of hectic on his cheeks, and a wild look in his eyes, started up at sight of them, but softened as the two girls ran into his arms where he held them to him, and all forgetful of Easter's undutifulness, kissed her fondly, though it was Nan whom he kissed longest, and held closest to his heart.

When he had retired to the window, and under pretence of blowing his nose had removed unwonted tears from his cheeks, Easter began to dry hers also, for though greatly troubled at the change in him, she felt keenly that it was Nan whom her father was really glad to see, not herself; and the grief or suffering that is independent of us, that we cannot touch with a finger, or soothe with the balm of our sympathy is not vital—not a part of us, and leaves most of us selfish ones somewhat indifferent and cold. It was of Nan, and what Nan had done in town, that Tom enquired when he returned, and it was

observable that he did not enquire for Jem—who tarried unaccountably.

Even Easter's air of fashion, perhaps by contrast to his own estate, seemed to affect Tom disagreeably, and after those first moments of expansion, and one or two disparaging glances at her raiment, he resumed his seat by the fire, and relapsed into silence.

It is hard to say what takes the heart out of a man so entirely that he acquiesces dumbly in his fate—and will not rise to contest it. Sometimes his failure is due to utter lack of sympathy where he most has a right to expect it, for to have one faithful breast on which to pillow his head, one heart to believe and proclaim him right howsoever wrong, may make a man master of himself once more, and mail-proof against calamity, so true it is that we all, strong or weak, more or less unconsciously lean on one another. But oftener than not, he has himself only to blame, for every man, on occasion, should be

able to make a wall out of his own backbone, and look at it as you would, the supreme moment of Tom's life had come, and in moral courage he failed to meet it. Physical pluck he had in plenty, but that is nothing ; it is an instinct born in some men with other hereditary vices and virtues ; while the power to respond worthily to a tremendous and unexpected call upon our energies is bred in ourselves, and no one can help us, or claim the smallest share in the honours we then obtain. And like many another man, he could not bring himself to retrace his steps while there was yet time, and own up to his failure, for he was cursed with that false pride which has impelled millions to ruin, causing them to devise fanciful schemes for the future, instead of setting themselves painfully to reconstruct the past, and the man who will not face his obligations one by one, has himself to thank if at last they become bound into a faggot that no earthly power can break.

Maria came in, bearing a bowl of beef-tea, that she carefully set down before welcoming her daughters, for she thought they might have gone to see *her* first, instead of Tom. She had not quite forgiven Easter for taking French leave, and I think most mothers look and feel a little oddly on first seeing a child lately subject to them, emancipated with equal rights and privileges to themselves. She was preoccupied, too, with Tom, though possibly this poor man, going to pieces, a hopeless derelict, before her eyes, though she could not see it, could have put up with less excellent chicken-broth, if a little more sympathy had been forthcoming, but lack of comprehension is almost the rule in one's life partner, and it is only a guileless fool, upon whom the lessons of life are wasted, who expects any.

And there was with Maria a tendency to argument, and a mild persistency in speech when silence would be golden, that continually

rasped the choleric, passionate-hearted man, and it may have been in some such moments of spiritual starvation or frustration, that Mr. Denison had impulsively started on his course of kicking the men-servants, and kissing the maids, and possibly Maria mixed up the memory of more than one pretty Mary or pretty Sukey with her admirable method of making beef-tea and broth, in such a way that the mixture did not always adapt itself comfortably to poor Tom's sensibilities and stomach.

"Nan," said Mrs. Denison, with a slight sniff, when Tom had ungratefully taken a spoonful of beef-tea, and calling it "muck," had pushed it away, "I don't like that hat at all. Where did you get it?"

Nan started. Her vanity had been quite in abeyance, but now she put up her hand guiltily, to feel if by any chance she had overlooked her contraband red ribbon. Finding it was not there, she said :

“Easter gave it to me, mother,” pointing to that elegant young woman, who was just then looking out of window, and congratulating herself on having the Shaw to flee to, even if she had lost Town, though there was no earthly reason why Town should not see her again after the recess.

She was glad when Jem came in—not altogether sure of his reception, but perhaps his masculinity, used as Mr. Denison had lately been to women, roused Tom to be a man himself, and he made a great effort to appear his old self—not unsuccessfully, and when Maria and the girls had gone away, the two men talked seriously and gravely, as men will when vital issues are concerned.

“I got hit over jute last summer,” said Tom, “and then there were those law-suits, and I spent a fortune over that new machinery I got over America to supersede the hand-loom, and the work is a failure, and most of my Government contracts have been

thrown back upon my hands—but I've got an idea," and he proceeded to explain.

Jem listened, and shook his head.

"No man ever yet gambled himself out of debt," he urged, "and the business is all right still. Look into things—cut expenses down—go to the works every day, and face every soul with whom you have not been able to keep your engagements, and you'll pull through all right yet."

But this was just what Mr. Denison would not do. He had made a town out of a village of mud hovels, and by the wages he gave, clothed the male factory hands in broadcloth, and the women in silks and gewgaws, but when it came to facing and discharging one half of them, or even asking them to work at reduced wages, he simply had not the pluck to go and do it, and told his son-in-law so straight.

"Man! man!" cried Jem, coming close up to him, and speaking with that vital

roughness which sends new life in electric shocks through a physically and morally run-down fellow-creature, "every day this fatal lethargy, that has crept over you, will become more impossible to shake off, and at last it will be too late—even if you wanted to act, it will be too late. There is nothing irrevocable but death," urged Jem, keeping his temper, when Mr. Denison broke out into passionate words, "even dishonour may be lived down in time—and no such stigma yet attaches itself to you, or your name yet. Let me help you—what I can do without wrong to Easter, I will—there *must* be some way out, without another mad speculation."

But this was too much. To a man who had certainly lost thousands, but saw millions in a new idea, such advice was insulting, and in a burst of extraordinarily sultry language, Jem sadly beat a retreat, and drove Easter home to the Hangingshaw.

CHAPTER X.

“The man is very simple who thinks that when human nature is eagerly set on doing a thing, he has any means of diverting it, either by law, or any other terror.”

“WHAT!” cried Easter, throwing out her arms, and standing transfixed in the middle of the room.

“He came into the schoolroom, as if he had never gone away,” began Nan, whose hat was as much askew, her gloves as holy, and her frock as tattered as if she had never tasted any Town joys in her life.

“And what did he say?” cried Easter breathlessly.

“That he had come to see father. At first the Chief wouldn’t hear of it, so Basil just walked straight into the Green-room, and was there two hours. Mother wanted him to take her round the garden after that,

to find out about things, you know, but he hadn't time—and Dinkie drove him to the station afterwards. Dinkie looked him all over carefully to see what it was that made me say he was such a swell in Town, but he couldn't see any difference in him anywhere—he was just the old Basil—*my* Basil,” added the child triumphantly.

“Did he—did he enquire for me?” exclaimed Easter, sitting down absently on a ball-gown—for she and her maid had been in the full swing of a dress rehearsal when Nan had rushed in.

“Why should he?” said the child, almost austere. “I suppose he came to help father, because—oh! Easter, never tell anybody, but the tears were rolling down poor father's cheeks when I stole in after Basil had gone—I crept out again—and he never knew it—but I *saw* them.”

“Basil is a dear,” said Easter warmly, and Nan on the point of eager agreement, stopped

short; somehow she never encouraged Basil and Easter's praise of each other now, though there had been a time when she never wearied of trying to bring them together.

"He might have come over," said Easter, to whom a fortnight of the country, and its joys, of Jem and domesticity, had more than sufficed, and when you are scouring the heavens for a particular star in the sky, it is maddening to find it has popped out while your back is turned, and gone in again, probably for a long time.

Both Lala Hoyos and Basil had been invited to Fitzwalters for the holidays, and the party must have assembled by now, for to-morrow was Good Friday, but Basil's appearance at Penroses, and return to Town meant he was not coming to Fitzwalters; he would not have gone to her father if—if—thus subtly do women reason.

Jem at this moment put his head gingerly

in at the door, showing a ruddy countenance illumined by much content.

“Do come in, or go away,” cried Easter, “if there’s anything I hate, it’s a person going about as if he were beheaded !”

Thus encouraged, Jem advanced, a heavenly odour hanging around him, and nodding affectionately to Nan, popped a strawberry into Easter’s reluctant mouth.

The strawberry was sharp and stung Easter’s palate, yet its scent had held a whole world of enticement, “like Basil,” she thought, “who might be just as disappointing when eaten as that strawberry. Jem,” she said, eyeing him over unfavourably, “isn’t it nearly time for you to go and meet Hugon?”

“No. Her train doesn’t get in for another three hours.”

“Well, then,” said Easter, still irritably, “go away *somewhere*, and don’t come back till luncheon.”

Jem went off obediently, perhaps because it was luncheon-time now, kissing her first, poor fellow, as he always did, whether he had an excuse or no.

“O, Nan,” cried Easter wildly, and pushing her hair back from her forehead, “how little it takes to make some people happy, and others how much!”

Nan glanced round at the room made livable by long generations of mothers, and all that Jem’s love and taste could do for it, at the many windows that had such glorious outlooks on so fair a kingdom, and lastly, at the young wife standing in the midst of all her splendid gauds with a sting in her heart that had brought out two angry roses on her cheeks, and a restless, thwarted look into her eyes that boded ill for somebody—possibly herself.

“Easter,” cried the child, struck by a sudden resemblance, “don’t look like that—it’s just like father looks when he *will* take

his own way, and it's bad for him, poor, poor father!"

"Nan," said Easter smartly, "go home and stick to your school books. What fun I had in this," she added restlessly, as she picked up a cloth of silver and pink gown, "and this" — and she touched a dress of Seville orange velvet edged with black fox — "but I think I love Fenwick's grey driving coat best of all, such good times I had in it on Basil's coach!"

"And if you wanted to go on a coach," said Nan, "why didn't you make Jem have one?"

Easter shuddered.

"He would always want me on the box-seat," she said. "Lala says it's so almost impossible to make a respectable woman interesting, but it's *much* harder to make a respectable man so! Isn't this tea-gown a dream?" and Easter held out a soft, white silk wrapper smothered in Mechlin, with

enormous sleeves, caught up to the very shoulder, to show the bare arms below; "it's *immorally* lovely, and so I told Fenwick, and that an ugly woman who dared to put it on, ought to be prosecuted!"

"I shouldn't have thought you'd find Mrs. Hoyos worth quoting," said Nan, looking away from that white snare, as if she hated it.

"O, yes, *I do*. You must talk by telegram nowadays, or you don't get a hearing, and everything must be boiled down to a spoonful, or you won't trouble to swallow it. We want the bottom fact of everything, and no more—so exit the Book, and enter the Penny Comic. Nan, how did he look?"

"He hadn't got a new face. I think I've seen his coat before too."

"Don't try to be clever, child. Hadn't you got the sense to ask if he were coming to Fitzwalters?"

"No, Easter, I'd got the sense *not* to. He was just the same to me as he used to be,"

burst out Nan, warmly, "he's all right when he is away from Town. It's a beautiful place," added Nan sighing, "but dreadfully wicked—Dinkie is quite sure it hasn't improved *me*."

"You are an ungrateful young monkey," said Easter. "Did he say if he were coming back? Do ask father."

It was a heavy heart that Nan took down to luncheon, where Dinkie, who was a natural gourmand, impatiently awaited them, while Easter on her part greeted him with real pleasure, for she greatly missed his buffooneries in the elegant solitude of the Shaw, and moreover meant to pump him presently when she got a chance, about Basil.

Dinkie was enjoying himself so much indeed, that presently he began to grumble—grumbling being our propitiatory offering to the jealous gods lest they should slay us.

"And if we're going to bust-up," he announced in his cheerful bellow during a

temporary absence of the servants from the table, "why, let us bust. If there ain't any 'oss-'air for me to go into, what's the good of my learning the business? I'd far better buy a besom and go to Town, where with my good looks, and the family cheek, I *ought* to be able to make a very decent thing of it, and Nan would make a capital street arab, and if she behaves herself, might come too, especially if she learns to do cartwheels properly."

Just then Jem came in—not alone—with a swish of petticoats, and mingling of voices that turned Easter rigid, and arrested the hand that was feeding the dogs with biscuits. Basil had gone, and returned again. . . . she could not have moved or looked round, if her life had depended on it, while Dinkie helping himself largely to some more stone-cream, fixed an impudently appraising eye on Lala's hat, which was of a shape hitherto unknown to him.

“How are you, dear?” enquired that lady’s unembarrassed voice behind Easter, “we only came down yesterday, but thought we’d look you up, and ask you to give us some luncheon—only Bill took a wrong turning as usual, and made us disgracefully late.”

Easter suddenly recovered her voice, and the power of her limbs. She rose and shook hands with her guests, while the servants began to re-arrange the table, and the dogs yelped in a piercing chorus that would have been impressive if they had only kept time.

“Lovely weather, ain’t it, Mrs. Burghersh?” said Bill cheerfully, as he got out of a driving coat, composed mainly of buttons. “Always a glorious Good Friday, you know, when we ought to be howling for our sins, and a blizzard or a deluge on Easter Sunday when you’ve got your prayers over, and earned the right to enjoy yourselves. You and Burghersh’ll come over to

dine and sleep to - morrow, won't you? Awfully starchy lot of people this time—everybody abroad you know, or looking at fellows' pictures, and so on. Eh?" This last in answer to Dinkie, who, keenly scenting an "outing," was whispering something into his ear.

"I've got a swallow-tail," said Dinkie, "at least father has, you know, ask *me*."

"Certainly. Mr.——?"

"I've met you before—got a father who makes chair bottoms, you know—Ha! ha! My name's *Dinkie*."

"Sounds like a Christy Minstrel. And that little girl over there, I've seen *her* before—bring her along too."

"I'm afraid," said Dinkie, carefully avoiding Easter's eye, "she is scarcely presentable enough, girls want such a lot of dressing up—but give a man two sets of togs, and there he is, don't you know?"

"I didn't blame you for running away as

you did," said Lala, looking a picture of coolness in her tailor-made coat and skirt of white drill, as she discussed her cutlet. "Lenten festivities are like brandy and soda with the brandy left out—and the country is looking charming now. What a dear old place this is," she added glancing round, "Bill, why can't you make your old barn comfortable like this?"

"You're always so fearfully down on my place," said Bill, looking hurt; "if you hate it so, why do you come down to it? And there ain't a soul to amuse you now Strokovff has played us false again—it's very odd, but while town's a haystack in which you can always find Basil as the missing needle, we always seem to lose him when he gets into this neighbourhood."

"Only," said Lala, her grey eyes narrowing as she looked at the spoonful of cream she was carrying to her lips, "this time he doesn't happen to be in this neighbourhood."

Easter grasped the situation. For once Basil had given his Sultana the slip, promised to come to Fitzwalters, and failed to do so, and she had come over to the Hangingshaw—to enquire.

“No, he is not in the neighbourhood now,” said Easter calmly, “but he was yesterday.”

The eyes of the two women met. There was an odd light in Easter’s, and she smiled dangerously. Jem flushed scarlet, and bent his head lower over his plate, Nan looked scared, and Bill with difficulty repressed a whistle, then inwardly swore at Basil for making such a fool of him—and of Lala. So this was why she had dragged him over to the Shaw—to look for Basil—and now he supposed the two women would be cutting each other to ribbons—for there was a devilry about Mrs. Burghersh to-day that astonished him—he didn’t think she had it in her—for the triangular arrangement in Town had always puzzled him.

Could not anybody see that Strokoff was mad after Easter, and that Lala, who loved him herself, was aiding and abetting him? And then the women had apparently quarrelled, and Lala had come out first in the class, and now it was Easter who scored, and Bill carefully avoided looking at Jem, and roughly pitied him for a fool.

“Awfully good chap, Strokoff,” said Dinkie, his mouth full of preserved fruits, “and as to his cravats, he ought to have a medal for the way he ties ’em—if he hadn’t seemed so down in the mouth last night, I’d have got him to shew me how he did it.”

Easter laughed, and got up, somehow missing Lala, who sauntered alone into those drawing-rooms that were as different as possible to her own green and yellow salons, yet that in their splendid glow of colour suited Easter perfectly, while the trees of azaleas throwing aloft their thousand blooms of white and scarlet especially aroused Mrs. Hoyos’ ad-

miration, and she sank into a chair to admire them.

And yet without these azaleas, and in the winter, when a man alternately hunted and shot, and snored—it might become hateful, unless indeed Basil should make a habit of pervading the neighbourhood . . . in that case . . . the luxurious chair stifled her, she got up abruptly, and went out with Nan, who, feeling it her duty to be polite, offered timidly to show her the garden.

“Jem,” Easter said, as she rushed into the study to which he had retreated (Dinkie and Bill having gone off to the stables together) “I hate that woman—I hate her—it shall be pull devil, pull baker between us, and I’ll win, I will—*I will*.”

“Win what?” said Jem, holding his wife away from him, and looking gravely into her passionate face.

“O! don’t you *see*, Jem, that she came down to Fitzwalters because she thought

Prince Strokoff was going to be there, and when she found he wasn't, that I should be as disappointed as she was, and so she came over to-day just to crow over me? Well, I crowed loudest, and longest—that's all! It's vulgar—it's low, Jem, but O! it's sweet!"

"And what was Strokoff doing in this neighbourhood?" said Jem, who did not appear to find anything at all sweet in the situation, and whose mouth and chin seemed to have taken new, stern curves to which his wife was not accustomed.

"I fancy he came to try and help father."

"Easter," said Jem, quietly, "why don't you let these two, Prince Strokoff and Mrs. Hoyos, alone? They are old friends—and will continue to be such to the end—unless I am very much mistaken."

A husband's sound advice is often good, and rarely taken, and Easter did not know how much those few words covered in Jem's reticent, magnanimous soul. In after days

he cursed himself for his silence, and always thought that if he had spoken plainly to her that day, events would have been different, but I am sure that he would have spoken in vain—for deafer than the adder to reason was Easter at that time, and strange but true it is, that our worst acts and follies are committed because we wish to assert ourselves with those whom we despise, and who are potent with us for evil, while what we truly love has no power to influence us for good.

And to guide a high-mettled, high-spirited young creature such as Easter, was a perilous task, as Jem well knew, though her principles were too good, he thought, to allow her to get into serious trouble. One can't be bred up on the Bible without imbibing some of its precepts, adopting some of its tenets, and under all the foam of Easter's fancies he knew that there beat a very true and steadfast heart indeed, which would right itself, he was certain, in the end.

“Jem!” said Easter, by way of answer to this, the only appeal he ever made to her, “don’t look at me like that! I hate physic. And now come along and make yourself pleasant to Mrs. Hoyos.”

They met her coming from the White Pavilion, and complaining of the April wind, that never ruffled her without revealing some daintiness of petticoat, or shoe, or stocking, daintier in her surely than in any other woman.

Only when her temper was ruffled as now—for she had pumped Nan in vain as to Basil’s plans—it did not afford charming peeps at her character, as did the breeze of her *lingerie*; quite the reverse indeed, and probably the nearest approach to hating a woman that she had ever known in all her successful life, made itself felt now, as Easter, radiant, and with mocking eyes, came towards her.

“I’ve sent Bill for the dog-cart,” Lala said

easily, "we must allow at least three or four hours for accidents, and reckon ourselves fortunate if we reach Fitzwalters in time for dinner. I think that this must be the original Garden of Eden, do you know? Take care," she added, "that the Serpent does not get in and spoil it!"

"What kind of Serpent, Mrs. Hoyos?" enquired Jem gravely.

Mrs. Hoyos laughed, looking straight into Jem's eyes, that met hers unflinchingly, then she changed the subject. Almost immediately, Bill, closely escorted by Dinkie, appeared, and as they went towards the dog-cart, urgently renewed his invitation to them all to come over, and stay as long as possible.

But Easter excused herself. Mademoiselle Hugon was coming, she said, and when Bill included the governess also, Easter still declined—she was too busy, she said, just now.

"You are expecting Prince Strokoff perhaps?" said Lala.

“Yes. Can I give him any message for you?”

“I say, Easter,” whispered Dinkie in her ear, harassed by fears lest the shirts, ties, waistcoats, and other necessities required for a three days’ visit to Fitzwalters would not be forthcoming, and also by grievous misgivings that the Chief’s slight corporation would destroy the set of his evening bags on Dinkie’s straight person, “you’ll help me out with some of Jem’s things, if I run short, won’t you?”

“You’ve got to get father’s consent first,” said Nan, tripping up his heels, and feeling that she was very much out of it indeed, and consequently trembling on the verge of tears.

“There is no need of messages between two such old friends,” said Lala, as she stepped neatly into the dog-cart. “Basil and I will meet again in Town almost immediately, and every day, as usual—Good-bye. No

chance of your coming up to finish the season, I suppose? Good-bye, Mr. Burghersh, and don't forget my advice about your Eden."

"I won't. I'm proud of my garden, and I pity from my soul those who have no garden to cherish."

Lala laughed, but for once in her life, her eyes fell before the resolute ones of a man whom she found it as utterly impossible to despise, as to deceive.

"Good-bye, everybody," said Bill lugubriously, and looking something like a dog tied up with string, who is left to the tender mercies of cats; "if Strokoff does turn up, tell him——"

But a smart cut from the whip in Mrs. Hoyos' hand made the horse bound forward in such fashion, that the remainder of Billy's valedictory message was inaudible.

CHAPTER XI.

“I here you saye, farewel ; Nay, nay,
We departe not so sone.
Why say ye so ? wheder wyll ye go ?
Alas ! what have ye done ? ”

THERE is a story told of a man, who, frozen to the box one furiously inclement night, brought coach and passengers safely to their destination, the reins gripped fast in his stiff hands, and only by his grim silence and immobility, was presently discovered to be dead. And it was from luck more than actual guiding-power, that Hugon's strong will brought her alive to the Shaw, and on the very threshold threw her down, a mere log, that Jem lifted up, and carried into the house, pitifully as a man might.

The doctor shook his head over the unconscious figure, talked of nerve-exhaus-

tion, and had her put immediately to bed, where she was tended by Easter and her maid, but if the doctor had looked deeper than that brilliant rose-bloom of Mrs. Burgersh's which hid so much, even her real character and disposition, he would have discovered that the poor girl was ill herself, and she did not know it. Had there been perfect confidence between her and her mother, all might yet have been well, but Mrs. Denison seldom went beyond her own threshold, and she had less reason than ever to go now, while a visit to the Shaw was at present quite out of the question. Babies, beef-tea, Tom, her household and her needle-work, were surely enough to keep any woman's hands full, and though fond of Easter, she by no means erred on the side of over-appreciation of her, or her good looks. Indeed, on being informed by Nan that Easter had been chronicled in the town papers, as the most beautiful young woman at more than

one assembly, she had nippingly remarked that she did not think the *other ones* could have been up to much.

The question of health must always be reckoned with as an important factor in our lives, and physical causes will often take the form of moral aberrations that arouse in the beholders anger, where they should call forth pity and help. With health we can face the world, without it, we are like a man who aims a blow truly enough, but strikes aside because the blade is faulty, and incapable of carrying out his will.

So when our nerves are unstrung, the foe that we have hitherto fought doughtily, gets beyond us, and wrong becomes right, and right wrong, for it is only when we are sane in mind and body that we know how entirely we have been the victims of delirium, just as in our delirium we believed ourselves sane.

And when some man or woman of strong character fails grievously at some given point,

be sure that physical reasons have had much to say to the failure, and I speak more especially of women, for men are rarely nervous, and what good or ill they do is usually quite irrespective of nerves, or false conditions of health, while if any one thing on earth marks out more distinctly than another the difference between the sexes, it is the power a man has of sleeping soundly under every possible combination of circumstances. He can drive a woman mad, kill her if needs be, or, on the other hand, have his heart broken in two halves by a woman, and he can sleep the whole night through after it—and *snore*. It is thus that men beat us, not by intellect, but having no nerves, yet a woman without sensibility is a poor creature, more, she is a maddening one, and rasps you like an old file.

Hugon was more ill than Easter, inasmuch as her break-down was the result of long years of agony, and iron self-repression,

relieved by one oasis of happiness only to be followed by months of acute suffering, that had culminated in the fierce struggle she had gone through before finally throwing away a home for the sake of seeing Jem once more, though she would want no home long, for she was dying, she never questioned the fact as she lay too weak for speech, following Easter with her eyes, Easter who was not happy, even though she had the one man worth loving out of the whole world to love her. Hugon had very little consciousness of anything save that when the supreme moment came, perhaps Jem would come to her, and let her clasp her arms about his neck, and thank him for all the good he had done her, for all the love he had taught her, for that light which he had brought into her life, and made it beautiful, for no matter what long intervals of darkness and hunger there had been, in his company the sun shone out, and she dreamed the only dream that makes life worth living.

Perhaps if Jem had not come again to Fairmile after that amazing discovery she had made, her love might have remained always in that phase of exaltation in which it demanded nothing for itself, being in its very conception foredoomed to sacrifice, but the warm human joy that his gentleness and companionship had brought into her life, was only at last gauged by the actual physical pain she experienced when deprived of it, and all the stifled longings and passions that strove together like starving children in her breast, were left to beat themselves against a stony silence, in which the beloved voice, and face, and step never came.

“Keep yourself from idols”—but it was too late for such keeping back now. She could have done without him before, but she could not do without him now—she *would* not—so she had cried in her unappeasable desire to see him once again, and for this she had trampled honour and principle under foot,

and heedless of loyalty to Easter—of respect to herself—had, when at the very end of her strength, contrived to drag herself to the Hangingshaw.

When very near to death, we think we have a right to the one cold cup of water we crave—we shall want nothing else for so long, we argue, and perhaps, if Hugon had died then, much might have been forgiven her, and this story had not needed to be told, but she did not die—to the great misfortune of herself and others.

It is humiliating to reflect that we may go through the supremest spiritual suffering—die a thousand deaths from unsupportable anguish—yet recover, while a slight accident to our physical machinery will hurry us out of the world, often without pain, at a moment's notice.

And so it happened that rest, care, perhaps the handful of flowers that Jem sent her each day, the sound of his voice in the passage—

the certainty that she was near him, conspired to heal the sick woman, so that, as Easter's fever grew, Hugon's lessened, each woman being preoccupied to the extent of not being able to see an inch into the other's heart.

I suppose that to most of us comes a period in our lives, when, having fought to our human uttermost, even beyond it, we fight no more, but laying down our arms, suffer ourselves to drift, and abandoning all moral suasion, allow our hearts to say to us what they will. We no longer, measuring our powers by our desires, and over-estimating them, say, "*We will* do this or not," we are as little children, depending on the love and pity of others, knowing that we shall not depend in vain. And at last Hugon saw Jem—through the half-opened door reflected in a mirror, saw Easter held in his strong clasp, while the murmur of his kisses reached her ear—such was the fulfilment of her desire, and a nameless fury seized and blinded her,

she could have leaped upon, and torn them asunder, as, white and menacing, she reared herself in her bed, then hid herself shuddering as she realized into what an abyss a once half-divine passion had plunged her. Yet in that abyss she remained, henceforth, she said deliberately, "Evil, be thou my good."



CHAPTER XII.

“ Now take frae me that feather bed !
Make me a bed o’ strae !
I wish I hadna lived this day,
To mak’ my heart sae wae.”

WHAT was going on at Fitzwalters—this is what Easter wanted to know, and which even Dinkie could not tell her ; poor Dinkie, who, with the pick of his father’s wardrobe tied up in a sack, was just setting out on his stolen visit, when Tom appeared on the scene, and taking up the thread of family life precisely where he had laid it down, made things “ hum ” at Penroses.

It soon became known that he had tided over his difficulties, and to outsiders he was—as a factory hand described it — “ as harbitrary a gent as ever,” but those who could read between the lines found a great

alteration in him, and I don't think that look ever went out of his face which gets ground into it, when a man has once stood face to face with ruin. Even to Nan he was altered in a measure—taking some manly shame to himself for having leaned upon so frail a support, but she was his favourite child still, and when he one day proposed to drive her over to see Easter (Maria being detained by some nursery catastrophe), the child rushed to array herself, and in her anxiety to do justice to the occasion, made a more amazing guy of herself than usual. To sit with her father behind those fast-trotting horses—to see him cheerily point out this and that object, and note the healthy interest he took in field and hedgerow, and landscape—was the keenest joy to her, after those miserable weeks he had spent within doors — those nights when, creeping to his door, she had heard his broken ejaculations, his grinding teeth, and worst of all, those curses he had

heaped upon himself for the mad speculations that had brought him to such a pass. And now—the sun shone—the sweet spring wind blew over them, and Tom, softened and grateful at the prevention of a great calamity, had felt a wish to see Easter, and for the first time probably, almost forgave her that runaway marriage.

When she ran out to welcome him, his warm embrace and concerned, “You are not looking well, my girl,” brought tears to her eyes, and shaming her of that pre-occupation with self, that had made her almost oblivious of him in his late troubles, while Jem’s heart sank at Tom’s speech, he could see for himself that Easter was not well, and with all his liking for Hugon, he wished she had been ill anywhere on earth rather than at the Hangingshaw, for he set down Easter’s changed looks to a sick-room atmosphere, also in a measure to the boredom of receiving those callers, whose carriage-wheels had been

cutting up the courtyard gravel ever since they had returned home. And it would not have comforted him to know that they all thought her very lovely—extremely delicate, and not at all happy.

“Well?” said Easter, flashing round on Nan when at last they were alone together.

She did not even mention Basil’s name—he was in the air, in her heart, in every voice that came to her, in the breath of every passing flower. She could not free herself of his influence, or think of Jem, or Hugon, or any of the things nearest to her, but only of him.

Nan did not even affect to misunderstand.

“He has not been to Penroses again,” she said gravely. “Where is Hugon?”

They were out in the grounds now, and Easter, looking up at one of the distant windows, sighed impatiently.

“She has been ill,” she said; “then was better, and is now ill again. I can’t make

out what is on her mind. I wanted Jem to try and find out, but she seemed to go mad at the bare idea of seeing him, and yet, Nan, would you believe it?—I caught her kissing and crying over some bits of moss and fern he had brought in from the woods to her other day! She's either a little mad—or a little bad—or perhaps both."

"Don't say that," cried Nan. "Oh, Easter, I was reading some lines the other day—I daresay you'd call them silly—they're so simple, but they run in my head so:

“ ‘Thinking, with sadness,
If badness there be,
It might have been badness
In thee or in me. . .’

p'r'aps because I'm so wicked myself, I *do* feel sorry for people who may try as hard to be good as I do—and fail nearly as often."

"Well, mingle your badness together," said Easter flippantly. "Take her over to Penroses—Jem grudges every minute I spend

with her—and really, between the pair of them, I find life uncommonly dull just now!”

“And it’s so lovely here,” said Nan, looking wistfully around her, “and you’ve nobody to sit upon you, or make you do lessons, or anything but what you like, Easter!”

“Haven’t I?” said Easter, in a curious tone. “Well, take my advice, and never get married, Nan—the one man business is so *very* monotonous!”

“Just think if you’d got nobody to love you at all!” cried Nan warmly.

“I think I should survive it—I never had a taste for molasses myself, or enjoy anything in my dinner so much as the savoury—and the number of them is *so* limited! By the way, has Bunkulorum gone a buster on snails lately? After all, do you know, I shouldn’t wonder if he turns out the real man of taste in the family! One must have courage to experimentalize like that—it’s a bit of the

Chief coming out in him, just as it does occasionally in me."

"There's a deal of human nature in us Denisons," said Nan sorrowfully.

"Nan," said Easter abruptly, "who saved father?—Basil?"

"Father never said a word."

"But it *was* Basil?"

"I think so," said Nan reluctantly.

"And why did he do it?" Exultant, proud, with a strange intoxication in it, Easter's voice rang out—but to Nan it sounded only—wicked.

"He always liked father," she said gravely.

"But a man does not throw away a fortune for—a liking. Would he have done as much for Lala Hoyos, I wonder?"

"Oh, Easter," cried Nan shocked. "Why do you say such things? I don't know you; it is not like you."

"No; but I am like father," said Easter, nodding resolutely. "If he chooses to do a

thing, he *will* do it, whether it's right or wrong—and so will I.”

Nan trembled. This new glimpse of Easter, all obscured as her character had always been by her beauty, appalled her, while the hint it gave of hidden strength for good or evil, was a still greater revelation.

“You have all been wrong about me—quite wrong,” continued Easter calmly, and talking her heart out as people had a knack of doing to Nan. “I have been treated like a child, patted on the head for my stupid good looks—even Jem’s eyes have misled him more or less all along—and as to Basil, he simply never got through the disguise of my skin. It’s very hard for one’s heart and character to show through—but there’s a very real *me* under it all, Nan—I shan’t say I—it’s *me*. I’ve got father’s temper and wrong-headedness on some points, and mother’s calm stiff-neckedness in others, and they make me bad to beat when I do make

up my mind about anything, as you will all see."

She did not add that she had her mother's high principles too, perhaps would not know it till the occasion came to test them. She was stripping from their stalks the flowers she had gathered coming up the terrace, and her eyes now turned away to the dim coast-line beyond the woods, as if she sought in it to read her fate.

"Why should one's value depend so greatly on one's setting?" she said at last. "At Penroses he seemed to me only a very handsome and impertinent stranger—in Town he was king over all the rest, yet he sought me before all women . . . and we were very happy together till you came between us, Nan, and interrupted us."

Nan could find no answer to make, and Easter after a pause went on again.

"We should have quarrelled soon,¹⁰ no doubt—got tired of one another, only there

was not time for that—I wish there had been. As it is, it just left me hungry—always hungry—Nan, longing to see him again, as one wants to know the end of the half-finished play, from which one has been abruptly hurried. . . . Oh! I married too soon, Nan, too soon! I should have had my fun out—I am like one of the brides of whom Heine tells, who die having still the desire of dancing in their hearts—the impulse of it in their feet . . . and dance their spirits will, with the belated wayfarers in lonely roads . . . and the dance is still in MY feet, Nan—and the impulse to make Basil love me still in my heart . . . just that is all I want. And then, sooner or later, probably sooner, I should find out he is no better, probably not so good as many another man, and I should feel with Chevalier that ‘There wasn’t a *man* in all the world, that I’d swop with my dear old *Jem*.’ ”

“Poor Jem!” said Nan passionately.

“Poor Easter, you mean. He managed badly ; he hurried me, and I was not in any hurry . . . though do you know I actually *kissed* him once without his ever asking, because I wanted to save myself from Basil? For Jem was my fate all along, and I knew it. Only marriage should be the end of courtship, not the beginning—it is like sitting down to an everyday dull banquet, in love the *nougât* should come before meat!”

“He did not hold a bludgeon to your head at the altar, I suppose?” said Nan, who had reason to vividly remember Easter’s walking out one morning, and somehow forgetting to return.

“No, father’s temper was the bludgeon, and dulness the force that applied it. If—if Basil had come back. . . .”

“*Easter!*” cried Nan entreatingly.

“Only he didn’t,” said Easter, whose recklessness increased momentarily. “It seems to have been all ‘ifs’ with Basil — for

instance, if Hugon had given him my letters, everything might have been different."

"And you would be a miserable woman now," said Nan, who loved Basil, but knew his faults.

"Very likely—but it would have been love—*love!* He would be a demon-lover, Nan, and bite your very heart in two!"

Nan shrank away from her sister, and put both hands to her ears, but Easter pulled them down.

"Oh! Nan," she said, "I mean no harm. I do not love Basil, but I want Basil to love me. When his heart is quite full of love for me, then mine will be empty, for at the bottom of it, I believe I love Jem—no one could know Jem as well as I do without loving him; perhaps it's because I'm sure of him, that I'm so careless. . . . I would not dare to venture into so much mischief, if I had not got Jem to get me out of it—but he must let me have my fling, I'm not very old

yet—not nineteen. And if I could just hear Basil say, ‘*I love you,*’ I could be happy—I shouldn’t want any more. Something here,” she laid her hand on her heart, “would be appeased—it won’t ever be quiet till then . . . and I’d be a real Lady Bountiful, and study the Family Tree, and all the old books, and fossils, and things that Jem likes, ever after. And he is very happy, much happier with me and all my faults than he ever would have been with anybody else, Lady Biddy, say, or Hugon! Now, don’t make faces, child—but come in and see Hugon—there’s just time before luncheon, and see if you can get any sense out of her! *I can’t.*”





